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▶▶▶ACCEL WORLD 13

SIGNAL FIRE AT THE WATER'S EDGE

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"Hrrm, hrrm...!"

OCHRE PRISON

Burst Linker belonging to the Red Legion, Prominence, who breaks the cease-fire with Nega Nebulus and comes in as a challenger.

"We're not interested in your little excuses!"

PEACH PARASOL

Burst Linker belonging to the Red Legion, Prominence, who breaks the cease-fire with Nega Nebulus and comes in as a challenger.

BLAZE HEART

Burst Linker belonging to the Red Legion, Prominence, who breaks the cease-fire with Nega Nebulus and comes in as a challenger.

"That's right! We're the ones who decided to attack!"

"We are Burst Linkers. We speak with our fists and our battle cries!"

ARDOR MAIDEN

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus.

"...Unfortunately, the Black King is not in this stage."

AQUA CURRENT

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus.

"So then the reason you and your comrades are attacking is... to fight the Black King, Black Lotus?"

SILVER CROW

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus.

—Act from the Umesato Junior High Festival—

"This. Is a little.
Embarrassing..."

"Oh my
goodness! I'll
have to give
you a teeeensy
punishment
later, hmm?"

" ..
..."

" ..
..."

"Cc'mon!
Put it
back!!
I'll knock
your teeth
out!!"

RIN

FUKO

UTAI
SHINOMIYA

NIKO

AKIRA HIMI

BLOOD
LEOPARD





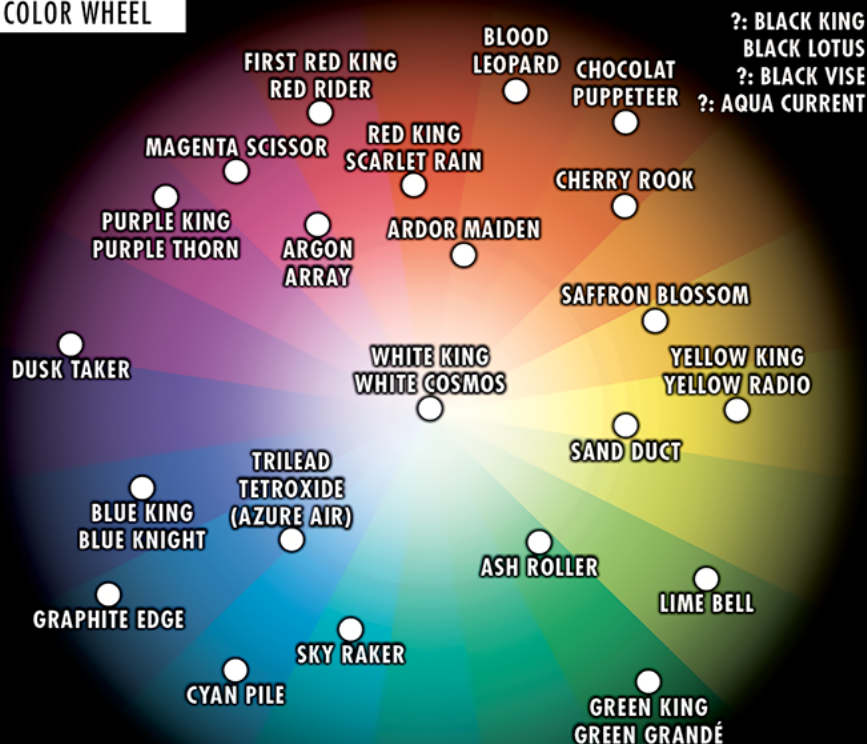
RIN

A Burst Linker girl who goes to an expensive girls' school. During duels, ownership of her consciousness shifts to Ash Roller, her older brother.

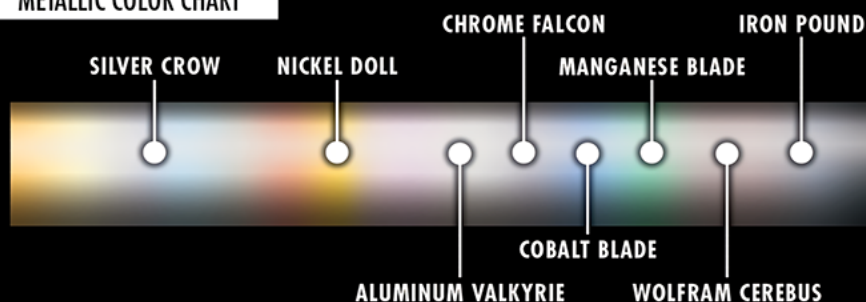
"I'm sorry, Arita. I'm sorry...Master Fuko...I... Yesterday. My duel avatar was parasitized... with an ISS kit..."

DUEL AVATAR AFFINITIES IN BRAIN BURST

COLOR WHEEL



METALLIC COLOR CHART



The English names given to Burst Linkers always include a word associated with color. Blues indicate close-range direct attacks; reds, long-distance direct attacks; and yellows, intermediate attacks. Mid-range colors such as purple and green signify affinities that straddle two different types of attack. Meanwhile, the avatars connected to metals exhibit superior defense abilities instead of offensive power.

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NEW YORK

■ **Kuroyukihime** = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ **Haruyuki** = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).

■ **Chiyuri** = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).

■ **Takumu** = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).

■ **Fuko** = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ **Uiui** = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ **Current** = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ **Graphite Edge** = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ **Neurolinker** = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ **Brain Burst** = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ **Duel avatar** = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ **Legion** = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

- **Normal Duel Field** = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
 - **Unlimited Neutral Field** = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.
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- **Movement Control System** = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
 - **Image Control System** = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
 - **Incarnate System** = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.
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- **Acceleration Research Society** = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.
- **Armor of Catastrophe** = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
- **Star Caster** = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
- **ISS kit** = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

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Battle Royale, one of Brain Burst's Normal Duel modes, was very much like a regular fighting game in that it incorporated an expanded framework to service combat beyond the regular one-on-one.

For instance, you didn't know which opponent existed where until they had come within ten meters of you or you saw them directly. Naturally, there was a guide cursor, but only one; it pointed in the direction of your closest enemy and would disappear if you were in combat. So it was more than possible that a new duel avatar could suddenly jump in while you were battling the Burst Linker before you. That situation was actually the true thrill of the Battle Royale.

In fact, in this duel—started unexpectedly at six PM, June 27, 2047—Haruyuki had first made contact with his old frenemy, the biker Ash Roller. Only then did the duel's initiator, the super-hard metal color Wolfram Cerberus, storm in on them.

In this third ferocious battle between the metal colors, Haruyuki had struggled with Cerberus's hold technique, but had just barely managed to escape by using his special attack Head Butt. He flew up, dragging Cerberus with him to a high altitude, and neatly put the other avatar in check.

However, another challenger had appeared to change the direction of the battle: the mysterious F-type avatar, nicknamed Quad Eyes Analyst, aka Argon Array. From the lenses equipped in her hat—lenses that had seemed up till now to be used for data scans—she had shot a terrifyingly powerful laser and pierced one of Silver Crow's wings, felling him. Argon then mercilessly shot

Cerberus—apparently an acquaintance of hers—and even destroyed Ash and his motorcycle all in one go; she was poised to stomp down the entire Battle Royale on her own. Or so it seemed.

And then a third challenger appeared and turned the tables once more.

“You’re the one who’s going to be crushed by a level one and lose a ton of points.”

The quiet—yet unfathomably powerful—voice shook the diamond dust dancing in the Ice stage.

An avatar of a unique hue, her entire body was enveloped by clear, circulating water.

The Burst Linker Olive Grab from Great Wall also had armor with a slick coating, but the thickness of his oil layer was entirely different from this. Babbling like a small river as it flowed from her head out to her four limbs and carving out four individual arcs to return to her head once more, the total volume of water this avatar held was about the same as the size of her main body itself.

From the slender waist and smooth form, it seemed like an F-type. And the voice, too, was more feminine than not, but since the avatar body itself couldn’t be seen, it was impossible to be sure.

The duel avatar that was probably a “she” used the chill air of the stage to produce ice javelins, which she launched to block Argon Array’s laser attack. From the concept of the attack to the precision of her aim, it was clear she was accustomed to fighting—making it very hard to believe that she was a newbie, as she’d just announced.

On his knees on the road, Haruyuki quickly checked the multiple mini-health gauges displayed in the top right of his field of

view. Since the gauges were automatically displayed in order of proximity, the one at the very top was that of Cerberus, who was immobile in Haruyuki's arms. He didn't even have 10 percent left in it, his strength having been carved away first in the battle with Haruyuki and then by Argon's laser attack.

Below that was Ash's gauge. He was on the ground, stunned, in a snowy field a ways off. Not only had he also been hit with the laser—he'd taken the entire splash damage from the explosion of his own motorcycle, so his remaining health was similarly under 10 percent.

And the third gauge was that of the mysterious flowing-water avatar. The level displayed contradicted her relaxed and imposing fighting style; it really did say 1. Gasping, wondering who exactly she was, Haruyuki's gaze moved to the avatar name beside the health bar.

"...Aqua Current..." Earlier, he'd seen—no, heard—the name he now muttered softly. And it was a name that had been spoken somewhere very important.

But for some reason, he couldn't remember whose mouth he'd heard it from or in what context.

—*Wait.*

Pssh. Pssh, pssh. In his ears, he could hear the sound of flowing water. The refreshing cool of it washed over the core of his mind, like a waterway that had been stagnant and then started to flow again. At the same time, a hazy feeling—no, a conviction—was born and grew within him.

"...That person..."

I know her.

And I haven't just heard her name. Sometime, somewhere...

not so long ago, we fought in the same stage. Not as enemies, but as a tag team.

That's right—she saved me. When I was facing a crisis so serious, so massive that my life as a Burst Linker was on the line, this avatar saved me.

And not only that...something more; something even more important happened when we parted...

“...Aah, you really gave me a fright there. Never even dreamed you'd show up here, Curren darling.”

This voice abruptly cut off Haruyuki's intent excavation of his own thoughts. He immediately sent his eyes racing in the direction it had come from, only to find the figure of Argon Array, standing with her hands on her hips, upon a rooftop on the south side of Oume Highway, their battlefield. The upper half of her face was covered by large goggles, so only her mouth was visible, and as always, a coquettish smile played on those lips. But at the moment, it seemed as though the tiniest bit of tension was bleeding through where there had been absolutely nothing like it before.

It was true that even if Argon had shot her apparent comrade, the battle was still three against one. This was precisely the time and place a player would normally tense up, but one of the three (Haruyuki) had 10 percent health left, and Ash was immobile, so it was basically no different from a one-on-one.

On top of that, Argon's health gauge was still full, and at eight, she was a vastly higher level. What on earth did she have to be on guard about against the level-one Aqua Current?

Occupying the top of a building exactly opposite Ash Roller on Oume Highway, Current's face was hidden beneath her flowing armor as she responded in her truly soft voice, “I didn't think we'd meet again like this either, Array.”

It seemed they'd known each other for some time.

"Hmm?" Argon asked in return, lightly shrugging a shoulder. "Then what kinda scene did you picture?"

"Naturally, a fight to the death...wagering all our points." Current uttered these fearsome words without the slightest hint of agitation.

Argon's reaction to this was a bit delayed. After a few seconds of silence, she erupted. "Pfft! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Same as always, saying the craziest stuff with the straightest face. You wanna get into a sudden-death duel with me, you gotta escape first, yeah?" And then, a breath later: "From Unlimited EK at the Castle."

"...!!"

The instant these words entered his ears, Haruyuki gasped sharply.

"Unlimited EK at the Castle": In other words, that meant that just like Ardor Maiden had been, Aqua Current was currently sealed away on one of the altars of the Four Gods, who numbered among the Super-level Enemies of the Unlimited Neutral Field.

But that's impossible! You can't use the Unlimited Burst command to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field unless you're level four.

Current, at a mere level one, shouldn't have been able to get anywhere close to the Castle.

Holding his breath, Haruyuki waited for her response.

But the flowing-water avatar apparently had no interest in continuing that conversation. She took a splashing step forward and turned toward Argon, who was thirty meters to her right.

“I’ll simply satisfy myself today with taking points from you. There’s not a lot of time left. Enough talk.”

“Ooh, don’t be cold like that. This is our long-awaited reunion, y’know? We both have so much to share...” Argon spread out her hands and shook her head—and then suddenly, her hat flashed.

She had fainted with talk and then launched her laser with no advance warning. And on top of that, it was both lasers at the same time. The super-heated purple heat beams melted the ice in the air on contact and carved out a pale trajectory, shooting toward Current.

Haruyuki didn’t even have the time to call out, “No fair!” The terrifying part of Argon’s laser attack was that there was little time lag from launch to hit. The lenses of the hat flared, and in the next moment, the beam of light was already reaching its target, dozens of meters away. Naturally, it wasn’t quite the “speed of light,” but it was fast enough to make spectators think so. Haruyuki, Ash, and not even Cerberus with all his fighting genius—none of them had been able to dodge it.

So Haruyuki believed that Current’s slender body would be blasted away with her flowing-water armor, and he reflexively turned his face away. But as he was on the verge of averting his eyes, he saw the special attack Argon Laser brush past Current and gouge into an ice pillar far behind her.

That super-precise sniper attack missed its target?!

No, hang on—!

The flowing water covering Aqua Current’s body had grown thin, and in its stead, something had appeared in front of her.

A cube made of water was floating at the end of her outstretched arm. An enormous cube, with one side around fifty centimeters long. It was so transparent he could barely make it out

without straining his eyes. Most likely, that cube had bent the trajectory of Argon's laser. In other words, it was the phenomenon of refraction.

He didn't understand why the high-energy laser, so powerful it melted even Cerberus's tungsten armor, had passed through and been refracted by water without simply causing it to evaporate, but at any rate, as long as she had that technique, Current had an essentially perfect defense against Argon's attack. The difference in strength between a level one and a level eight should have been overwhelming, but that was meaningless if no attack could actually hit its target.

"...Wow....," Haruyuki murmured from beneath his mirrored surface. The unconscious Cerberus in his arms had also overwhelmed a variety of midlevel Linkers—and that included Haruyuki, of course—with his extraordinary abilities as a level one, but Aqua Current's strength was another dimension still beyond that. Her style, that bearing—it was the dominion of a high-level player.

In fact, from the way Argon had spoken before, she and Current were old friends or something. If that was indeed possible, the only thing he could think of was that Current was no newbie, but an old-school veteran who had never once gone up a level that whole time.

"Aah, now that's somethin', Curren. You went and taught yourself a trick like that to fight me."

Once more, the laughing voice interrupted his thoughts, and Haruyuki looked up at Argon on the top of the building, unsure.

She continued. "It's true, with your 'Pure-Water theory,' my laser just goes right through, huh? But that technique's not so simple, from the looks of it. You gotta get some pret-ty tight control over the angle of laser entry, yeah? ...So, like, how 'bout this?"

Pew! The air shook, and a beam of bluish-purple light jetted forward. But the trajectory was not the extremely fine, straight line they'd seen so far—rather, it was fan-shaped. When emitting the laser, Argon had moved her head to the side ever so slightly.

The laser bent the instant it touched the cube of water, just like before. By the time it passed through the cube and came out the other side, the alignment was already more than twenty centimeters off, so it should have passed through empty air to the right of Current.

But this time was different. Because Argon had shaken the laser, once it passed through the cube, its trajectory shifted, and the beam grazed Current's right arm, albeit very lightly.

This time, there was a *shfk* sound, and then pale smoke rose up from the slender arm. At the same time, Current's health gauge was brought down to just over 10 percent.

It wasn't simply the power of the laser that generated so much damage from a mere scratch. No matter how much she acted the veteran, Current only had the health gauge of a level one. If she was hit with the same attack ten—no, nine—more times, her gauge would be helplessly blown away.

Thinking about how Aqua Current would respond, Haruyuki finally realized something. Her laser defense with the cube of water was indeed an impressive technique, but she definitely couldn't beat Argon with that alone. Brain Burst was a fighting game, and there had never been a single fighting game you could win with defense alone. Flying tools and special attacks would shave away health points, and no matter how perfect the defense might look, your gauge would slowly but steadily decrease. There was no way Current didn't know that.

In which case, where was she looking for her chance at victory?

It's obvious. That would be me! Haruyuki gritted his teeth and cursed himself for his own foolishness. Stupid dummy! Such an idiot! What am I just sitting here staring for?! The instant Curren refracted that first laser, I should have been flying up out of here. From her color and attack method, Argon Array's a long-distance type. If I just stick to her, that should lock away her laser attack. I'm sorry, Curren. Please give me just one more chance! This time, I'll work with you like a real tag-team partner!

Without noticing he had started to think as though Aqua Curren was also an old acquaintance of his, Haruyuki focused his mind. Argon's laser couldn't be fired continuously, it seemed. Once she fired, it seemed to take a minimum of three seconds to charge up again. With Silver Crow's propulsive power, that was enough time for him to fly up to the roof from the street and grapple with her.

In the brief moment before her next shot, Haruyuki turned his mind to Wolfram Cerberus, who lay motionless in his arms. He still didn't really know what the relationship between Cerberus and Argon was, but at any rate, this mysterious level-one Linker appeared to be under the Analyst's control. And since Argon was known to be a senior member of the Acceleration Research Society, Cerberus might have been connected to the organization that was maneuvering in secret to bring chaos to the Accelerated World, as much as it pained Haruyuki to think so.

Right. Thinking back, Haruyuki had already discussed with Kuroyukihime and Fuko the possibility that Cerberus was an artificial metal color. And the one who had proposed the Mental-Scar Shell theory that was the foundation of the Artificial Metal-Color plan was this very Argon Array.

But.

But, Cerberus, I'm sure you said it before: that if there's

something more important in this world than winning, then you wanted to see it. I believe that's actually how you really feel. No, I know that it is.

After promising this to himself, Haruyuki completely switched mental gears.

Defeat Argon Array. Even if he beat her here in a regular duel, the number of points he could take from her wouldn't make Argon raise so much as an eyebrow, but even so, he could show his intentions—his will.

Focusing his vision, Haruyuki looked up and saw the lenses built into Argon's hat flash with the faint light that was the signal for her laser's launch.

He left Cerberus to the snowy field and kicked off the ground with all his strength. His left wing had been pierced earlier by Argon's laser, so there was a hole in a metallic fin, but he was sure he could fly at least as high as the roof of a five-story building. No—he *had* to fly that far.

Byook! The laser howled and reached out to Aqua Current. Once again, Argon moved her head the tiniest bit as she fired to thwart Current's refraction defense. And just like before, the beam of light that couldn't be bent in time grazed Current's body, stealing another 10 percent of her health gauge.

But by then, Haruyuki was already closing in on the fourth floor of the five-story building where Argon stood. He just had to tackle her and bring this to a ground fight. He was a little reluctant to plan a fight with a pinning technique on an F-type avatar, but this was not the time for such concerns. Now was his first and only chance, created for him by Aqua Current.

"Ngaah!"

With a brief battle cry, Haruyuki was about to shoot forward

the remaining ten meters when Argon, afterglow lingering in the lenses of her headpiece, turned toward him. The lips beneath the goggles curled up into a grin.

The lenses of the oversize goggles he'd thought of as nothing but glasses shone a dazzling purple.

...No way. It's not just the hat. She has lasers in her eyes, too.

This flash of foreboding in Haruyuki's brain did indeed turn into two bright lines jetting out with a violent, high-frequency whine. Evasion: Impossible. Defense: Also impossible.

—Don't be afraid! Repel it!!

He couldn't have heard the voice of his parent and Legion Master, Kuroyukihime, in reality.

The time it took for the laser to shoot across the ten meters between them and reach him was not even one-tenth of a second. And, although it was true that Kuroyukihime had dived into this field as part of the Gallery, given that she had stayed behind somewhere in Koenji's Look Street outdoor shopping mall a fair ways off, it wasn't as though her voice could have reached him there.

Even so, Haruyuki obeyed the voice that filled his head and spread his wings to decelerate while crossing his arms in front of his body. At the same time, the two lasers, drawing out parallel lines a few centimeters apart, slammed up against the armor of his arms.

Earlier, when he had been shot in the right shoulder, her lasers had somehow or another cut through the metal of his armor like butter, causing serious damage. But this time, Haruyuki felt a pushing resistance, and the superheated energy turned into a large ball, stopping in front of his arms. The armor there was, in fact, the toughest part of Crow's body, along with his

helmet. But resisting a laser was not simply a defensive power.

It was the ability he had learned a mere day earlier to avoid—no, bend—all types of laser attacks. The name: Optical Conduction. He shouldn't have been able to come close to using it in an actual battle; he'd only succeeded in activating it once. And that was half in a trance, so he almost didn't remember how to move, how to bend the laser. He had actually completely forgotten that he had activated the ability, even after the Battle Royale started, until that very moment. But there was no doubt this was the last card he had to play.

“*Nngh...unh...*” Mustering every drop of mental power he had, Haruyuki resisted the lump of ultra-high energy trying to burn him to a crisp.

No, that's not right.

It's not about resisting; accept the light, guide it, release it. Rather than just creating a physical wall to reject it, interrupt it with a path leading to another world. That's the mirror mind I arrived at. The Way of the Flexible against light...

Casting aside his fear, Haruyuki loosely opened his clenched fists and imagined both arms, from sharp fingertips to elbows, as two light-guiding tubes.

Kashak, kashak. The guards on his arms transformed. It opened to each side from a centerline, and from the gap, long, slender crystals gradually rose up. The energy of the lasers that had been held in a ball state flowed into the rod-shaped crystals to the left and right to form a glittering X.

“...Sheeaaah!” Shouting, Haruyuki yanked his arms sharply to his sides.

The energy released from the crystalline rods flew into the space behind him, cutting two large holes in the snow-heavy

clouds before disappearing.

Now that she'd watched her special-attack lasers be repelled with zero damage, the smile finally disappeared from Argon's mouth. The lenses on her hat, apparently finished recharging early, began to shine once more.

If she alternated between shooting the lasers from her goggles and her hat, in theory, the lag between shots would shrink down to 1.5 seconds. Haruyuki's Optical Conduction ability was 100 percent resistant to laser attacks, but if he was taking hits at that interval, it would be difficult to repel them all.

Krk.

A hard sound came at him. But it wasn't the launch of the laser.

It was the sound of a lance of ice flying in from the opposite side of the road and plunging deep into the left lens of Argon's hat.

"Ack...!" the Analyst let slip, reeling. The charging energy inside the hat exploded, shattering the left lens and sending tiny pieces flying. This was apparently the weak point of the powerful weapon; Argon's health gauge dropped more than 20 percent.

Now! This was his last chance!

"...!" Without a moment's delay, Haruyuki beat his wings with everything he had. Silver Crow's body shot up like a coiled spring and closed in on the off-balance avatar. If he could just catch hold of her to keep her from moving, that should decide the battle.

Five meters left...three...His outstretched fingers were about to finally touch the Analyst's thin armor.

"Razzle Dazzle," Argon muttered, and three lenses—the one

left in her hat and the two in her goggles—shone with an incredible amount of light. But they weren't lasers. Just a pure, white light illuminating a broad radius.

Haruyuki had no sense of damage. His health gauge and its remaining 10 percent were untouched. But bathed in light at close range, his field of view was dyed white, and all he could see was a hazy view of his gauge and the counter display. Since he was pretty sure *dazzle* was an English word for *blind*, it was probably a blinding technique with no direct-attack power, just like the name suggested. But the ability to completely rob an opponent of their vision was perhaps even more powerful than the Yellow King's special attack Silly-Go-Round.

"Nngh...!" Haruyuki suppressed the reflexive urge to put his head down, and he spread both hands wide and tried to catch Argon with a shot in the dark. But the fingertips of his left hand simply grazed some part of her, and he charged into the icy roof of the building face-first.

"Heh-heh, trying to push me down? You're way out of yer league, boyo."

With only those murmured words lingering in the air, any sign of Argon vanished from his senses.

Fortunately, his vision was quick to recover, so Haruyuki sat up and intently peered into the blur the area had become, but there was already no sign of the Analyst. The guide cursor that was displayed once again pointed toward Wolfram Cerberus, who was still lying on Oume Highway below him.

Since entry into buildings wasn't permitted in an Ice stage, Argon shouldn't have been able to escape the battlefield so easily, and yet...

Wondering at this while refusing to give up, Haruyuki was whirling his head around when he heard a voice coming at him

from nowhere:

“Two people with light defense abilities tires even me out. How 'bout we call it a day? Time's almost up anyway.” Just as she said, the time remaining had, in the blink of an eye, dropped to a hundred seconds. Her laughter-filled voice came to him on the cold breeze, receding rapidly. “So we'll play again, Crow. And... darling Curren, too.” And then Argon Array's health gauge disappeared without a sound from the stack in the right of his field of view.

The reckoning of points in Battle Royale mode was a complicated calculation involving several elements, such as participant level, the values of damage taken and given, and kill bonuses. What could be said about this duel was that Haruyuki had done some serious damage to Cerberus, but he had also taken about the same from Argon, so he broke even. And although Argon had mercilessly shaved away the gauges of Haruyuki, Ash, and Cerberus, she'd been hit hard by the level-one Aqua Current, so she was also at zero gain.

As for Current, she'd had 20 percent of her health gauge shaved away by Argon's lasers, but she'd also broken one of Argon's lenses with her ice lance, doing about the same amount of damage, so taking the level difference into consideration, she should have taken some number of points from Argon—meaning that she'd succeeded magnificently in following through on her initial declaration of intent.

With these calculations racing through the back of his mind, Haruyuki finally recovered his vision and sought out Aqua Current. But she was nowhere to be found on the roof she had occupied until only moments before.

No way. First Argon Array disappears, and now her? But I have so many things to ask her. No, before that, I need to thank her for saving me. Still squatting on the roof, Haruyuki was about to call out her name, but before he could, a voice came

from behind him:

“Nice fight.”

“Huh?” Whirling around on his knees, Haruyuki found the unmistakable avatar with the unique flowing-water armor standing before him. Beneath the membrane of babbling water, pale eye lenses shone faintly. “Uh! Um! I, um, well!”

Just a little over eighty seconds remaining. Unable to immediately decide what should come out of his mouth, Haruyuki flapped both arms from his formal sitting position and simply rattled on in whatever direction his heart took him. “I-I’m sorry! You came and stepped up for me in the fight and almost pressed her up against a wall, and then I went and got taken down by a blinding technique...”

Faced with the sudden apology, Current let the glimmer of a smile slip through. She shook her head with a splashing sound. “No, you fought well. Blinding you and then running off is her specialty. That’s just how it goes. And if you had pushed Arra—I mean, the Analyst—any further, she might have pulled a sudden death on you with an Incarnate attack. In this situation, she wouldn’t hesitate to do so.”

“I-I-Incar...” Even if there was no one within hearing range, Haruyuki snapped to attention upon hearing this forbidden word.

Seeing his reaction, Current smiled again. “Anyway, Crow, I think you still have something you have to do in this battlefield. Something Argon Array wanted to prevent so badly she stopped her watching and challenged you personally.”

“Huh...O-oh!” Right, it was just like Current had said. Immediately before his wing had been ripped through by the sudden appearance of Argon, Haruyuki had been trying to communicate something very important to the genius Burst Linker Wolfram Cerberus, who’d arrived on the scene so abruptly in the Acceler-

ated World.

“R-right. Excuse me. I’ll apologize properly later!” Haruyuki shouted, bowing at Current before racing away, almost falling over himself. Without hesitation, he leapt from the roof of the building into an unstable glide with his injured wings. Once he’d landed in the middle of Oume Highway, he lifted up Cerberus from where he still lay on the ground.

The smaller avatar had yet to regain consciousness. Haruyuki looked over at Ash Roller a little ways off; his frenemy was now recovered from the stun effect and was wailing before the remains of his bike (“Noooooooo! My glorious machiiiiiiiiine!”), so Haruyuki figured that Cerberus’s unconsciousness was not due simply to damage taken.

There was a good possibility that this was a sign of the personality change that had happened in their last duel, but it wasn’t just his helmet; the armor on both shoulders was also silent. After looking up and seeing that they only had forty seconds left on the clock, Haruyuki steeled himself and started shaking the other boy. “Cerberus! Wake up, Cerberus!”

Haruyuki would still be fine if the one that awakened was the Cerberus II of the left shoulder, but he didn’t know what would happen if Cerberus III—the currently unconfirmed personality Argon called “Onesie”—in the right shoulder (or so he assumed) ended up coming out. But if he let this chance get away, it was totally unclear when he’d be able to contact Cerberus next. And he had no guarantee that even if they did meet again, he would be the first personality, Cerberus I.

“Cerberus...!!” He couldn’t be sure that his earnest cries actually reached the boy. But a faint light blinked beyond the wolf’s maw visor of his helmet. At the same time, the body encased in tungsten armor began to shiver.

“...Crow...”

The voice that finally slipped out was unmistakably that of the Cerberus I Haruyuki had now fought three times.

He pushed back a sigh of relief. “Cerberus, there’s no time left! But I want to talk with you more! Please, as soon as this duel ends, disconnect globally to keep Argon Array from challenging you, and”—he shook off a momentary hesitation and mustered up the next words—“come to this spot in the real world, the Oume Highway entrance to Look Street! I’ll be waiting for you there!!”

“ ... ”

Cerberus didn’t respond right away. He simply stared at Haruyuki’s face without nodding or showing any other kind of reaction. But Haruyuki distinctly felt a swell of powerful emotion seeking release in the small metallic avatar. In the upper part of his field of view, the counter mercilessly sliced the time away. Twenty seconds left. Fifteen. When the digital readout entered the single digits, Haruyuki nodded deeply at the still-silent Cerberus and turned his face to the sky—and then set his eyes on a completely unexpected sight:

Aqua Current, the flowing-water duel avatar, still on the roof of a building on the south side of Oume Highway. And then, on the northern side roof that Current had originally occupied, a lone jet-black silhouette stood silently.

Swords for all four limbs; skirt patterned after a lotus. Mask in the sharp shape of an inverted V, crowning a slender, supple body. Haruyuki’s parent and the master of Nega Nebulus, the Black King, Black Lotus.

Having registered Silver Crow on her spectator list, she’d dived automatically into this battlefield as a member of the Gallery when the surprise Battle Royale had started. But even if she were only a spectator with no fear of being attacked, it was risky for a king to reveal herself without a full understanding of the situation, so she had remained at the north of the shopping

street where they had materialized in the Accelerated World.

And yet now, she had appeared in such a conspicuous place, albeit only for the few remaining seconds. The reason for that was...

As Haruyuki stared upward, bewildered, Kuroyukihime raised her right arm smoothly. But not at Haruyuki.

The sharp tip of the Terminate Sword was pointing at Aqua Current. But this gesture held not the slightest hint of hostility; on the contrary, it looked like an expression of Kuroyukihime's heart, a desire to cross the ten-meter limit for distance between duelers and spectators and move closer. Or perhaps, more accurately, a desire to touch her directly.

Perhaps feeling the same thing, Aqua Current also raised her right hand and turned a fingertip with a thin line of water flowing down it toward Black Lotus.

A faint part opened in the gloomy clouds filling the sky of the stage, and a thin ray of evening light made the obsidian and water duel avatars shine the same shade of orange.

A second later, the counter hit zero, and the words TIME UP!! quietly burned before Haruyuki's eyes.

2

The instant he returned to the real world, the commotion of the shopping arcade closed in all around him, and Haruyuki unconsciously squeezed his eyes shut.

Koenji Look Street reached north from the Oume Highway intersection next to Umesato and stretched almost all the way to Koenji Station. And it was a shopping area with history: Buildings were crammed together on both sides of the pedestrian road, which was paved with brick-like permeable tiles, and had everything from ancient bodegas to cafés and galleries and the game shops Haruyuki so often frequented, so when night fell, it was busy with shoppers even on weekdays.

Haruyuki leaned up against a streetlamp/social camera pillar and fumbled with his Neurolinker to cut his connection to the global net. When he let out a long sigh, he felt a hand on his head—followed by a voice in his ear.

“Well done. That was an impressive fight against a level eight.”

His eyes snapped open, but before him, of course, was the beauty of Kuroyukihime, the Umesato student council vice president and Haruyuki’s parent. Just like when Haruyuki fought hard in the Territories every weekend, she had a gentle, proud smile on her face. But he sensed that there was another, separate emotion hiding beneath it. Sadness—no, a sorrow—for something lost that could never be regained.

“...Kuroyukihime...” With her hand still on his head, Haruyuki stared into her eyes. The last scene of the long Battle Royale was still burning in the back of his mind—the two Burst Linkers on ei-

ther side of the main road, hands outstretched toward each other. Considering that one was a level-nine king and the other a level one, it was hard to believe they had such a deep friendship, but the sight had been something like two sisters forced to live apart.

“...Um, Kuroyukihime. Aqua Current in the Battle Royale just now...”

“...Mmm...” The instant Haruyuki quietly uttered the name, Kuroyukihime lowered her right hand and dropped her eyes.

Seeing the look on her face, he hesitated for some reason he couldn't quite put his finger on. In his head, all kinds of questions whirled endlessly round and round—*“Do you know her?” “I've heard her name before,” “How can a level one be that strong?”*—and eventually a card with *“Why did she help me and Cerberus?”* popped up. Only then did Haruyuki finally remember the important promise he'd made.

“O-oh! I-I'm sorry! I have to go right now!” Haruyuki suddenly shouted.

“Go?” Kuroyukihime lifted her face in surprise. “Go where?”

“Th-that's—at the end of the duel, I told Cerberus to come to the entrance of this ped mall. That I'd be waiting for him!”

“Wh—? No, that's, but—”

Haruyuki knew Kuroyukihime was swallowing back the words “It's too dangerous.” As his parent, and as his Legion Master, it was a natural call to make. The relationship between Wolfram Cerberus and Argon Array was definitely not an ordinary one, and Nega Nebulus suspected that Argon was a senior member of the fearsome organization known as the Acceleration Research Society. Given this, Haruyuki also couldn't deny how big of a risk it was to expose himself to Cerberus in the real.

“...I know. But.” He nodded once and then lightly shook his head before continuing. “But he said to me that if there was something more important than winning fights in the Accelerated World, then he wanted to see it. At first, he said the meaning of it all was just to win and earn points, but through duels with me, he feels something. So...So I...”

As always, Haruyuki exhausted his verbal abilities at the crucial point, but even so, Kuroyukihime seemed to get what he was trying to say. Her slightly widened jet-black eyes finally eased like the sky on a spring night.

“Is that so? Then we’d best go.”

“Huh? ...Y-you can’t mean you, too?”

“I’ll be a little ways off. It’ll be fine. We don’t have time to discuss it.”

That was certainly true. If Cerberus did decide to come to the meeting place, but Haruyuki wasn’t there, then this whole thing would go nowhere. Or it might even have the opposite effect.

“U-understood. Okay then, I’m sorry, but we have to hurry!” Haruyuki took a deep breath and then started off to the south of the strip at a speed a little less than a trot.

After moving forward for a few minutes, slipping through housewives shopping for groceries and university students laughing as they strolled along, a large gate with a sign came into view ahead of them. Said to have been standing there since the middle of the previous century—although, of course, it had no doubt been repaired several times—this classical metal gate corresponded to the precise location of the Oume Highway entrance to Look Street.

At the moment, no boy who fit the bill was there. Although Haruyuki had talked a little with Kuroyukihime after the end of

the duel, considering where he had appeared in the Accelerated World, he had to have arrived first. If he just waited there, then probably—no, definitely—Cerberus would come. *And then, this time for sure, I'm going to tell him. Together...*

"I'll say this just in case." A hand reached out from behind to hold Haruyuki back as he moved to approach the gate.

Looking back, he saw a somewhat strange expression on Kuroyukihime's face. "Wh-what?"

"Keep the possibility in one corner of your mind at any rate. That Cerberus...might not be a boy."

"Okay—whaaaaat?!"

"Keep your voice down! ...I don't think that's the case either, but there is a precedent in your bitter enemy Ash Roller," Kuroyukihime said, slightly emphasizing the "bitter enemy" part as she removed her hand.

Ash, in the Accelerated World, was indeed an M-type to end all M-types, a Century End rider who referred to himself as "the great and mighty me." But in the real world, he was Rin Kusakabe, an extremely reserved, shy girl. As far as Haruyuki knew, she was the lone gender-flipped Burst Linker, but if there was one exception to the rule, then there always existed the possibility that there were two.

"And when it comes to special characteristics, Cerberus is more than equal to Ash...Understood. I'll be careful." Although he nodded his agreement, he began to doubt whether he could actually have a real conversation on first meeting if Cerberus turned out to be a girl. And if Kuroyukihime was watching from nearby on top of that, there was a serious possibility that his whole body would stiffen up, he'd go into super sweat mode, and he'd become unable to say anything other than the letter A.

Perhaps seeing through to these thoughts in Haruyuki's heart, Kuroyukihime simply said "Good luck" with a smile and turned toward the mall entrance just ahead of them. She ended up going into a fast-food restaurant to the immediate east of the sign gate, where she was going to observe—or rather, watch over—him from the other side of the glass.

Now that he was alone, Haruyuki took several deep breaths before firming up his resolve and starting to walk. A few meters, and he arrived directly beneath the gate, so he leaned his back against a metal pillar on the far side from the fast-food place. He glanced at Kuroyukihime sitting at a counter on the other side of the restaurant window and looked around at his surroundings again.

The time was 6:10 PM. It was a weekday, but there were plenty of people walking by. From his position, Haruyuki could see the sidewalk of Oume Highway running from east to west and the shopping street stretching out to the north, and on both roads, there was no shortage of office workers and students on their way home, as well as shoppers constantly walking around. However, at the moment, no one had stopped and looked his way.

In the Battle Royale duel, Wolfram Cerberus had appeared a little after Ash Roller, from the northeast. Which meant that in the real world, he (or maybe she) should have appeared from that direction as well. If he was actually going to respond to Haruyuki's request, that was.

Glancing at the time display on his virtual desktop, Haruyuki saw that just under five minutes had passed since the end of the duel. If the Burst Linker was going to come, it would be from the north or the east. Hands in loose fists, Haruyuki moved his eyes between the two directions. But passersby and buildings interrupted his gaze, not allowing for a clear line of sight.

"So you can see this far even in a normal duel stage, hmm?"

He heard the voice again in his ears, faintly. These were the words uttered by Cerberus after Silver Crow had brought him high in the sky immediately before Argon Array had challenged them. Given how Cerberus specialized in hand-to-hand combat on the ground, he'd probably never viewed the duel stage from that height before.

One more time. No—more. More. Any number of times, Haruyuki wanted to show him that view again: the snowy white streets of the Moonlight stage continuing on endlessly, illuminated by the enormous full moon. The sea of lights like the ground was overflowing with stardust in the Downtown stage. The green jungle reaching to the distant horizon in the Primeval Forest stage. The eternal twilight dyeing the sky an ephemeral madder red in the Twilight stage.

“...This world's infinite.” Haruyuki once more quietly murmured the words he had spoken on the battlefield and turned his face from Oume Highway to the shopping district.

And then he saw it: the figure of a small person standing perfectly still. One who had appeared in the blink of an eye on the side of the road, about twenty meters away.

The figure wore a white, open-collared shirt that was probably the uniform of some junior high and gray slacks with a fine checkered pattern. From the clothing, it was a boy, but the hair was longish. The face, more childish than masculine, was maybe that of a seventh grader, a year younger than Haruyuki.

Haruyuki was a little concerned about the slightly twisted expression on his face, as though he were enduring something painful, but what made the greatest impression was his eyes. Even with the tumult of the narrow, glitzy street wedged between them, Haruyuki keenly felt their gazes lock onto each other. The boy's eyes conveyed a strong light.

Normally, Haruyuki would reflexively turn his face away were

he to unexpectedly meet the eyes of someone he didn't know, but just this once, he held the boy's eyes intently. His gut instinct that this was Wolfram Cerberus was backed up by one other thing: the gray Neurolinker he clutched in his right hand. And, naturally, there was no such device on his slender neck. Haruyuki could see at a glance that he had carried out the order Haruyuki had whispered as the duel was about to end to cut his connection to the global net.

I'm here. Walk another twenty meters on those feet. If you do, we'll say hello first. Say our names, shake hands. And we'll start once more from there. Haruyuki spoke to him earnestly from his heart. Whatever organization Cerberus belonged to, whatever secrets he had, when it got right down to it, they were both players of the fighting game known as Brain Burst. As long as they shared that foundation, they would definitely be able to understand each other at some point. They could be friends.

I want to be friends with you, Cerberus!!



Perhaps picking up on this silent shout, the boy twisted his face further. His eyebrows were pressed tightly together; his pursed lips trembled. His right foot rose slightly, then came back down.

After a few seconds of inner conflict, the boy gradually relaxed his shoulders, and a faint smile rose upon his face. He snapped to attention, arranging his hands at his sides, and slowly lowered his head. When he raised himself up, he looked back, and then started running north on the shopping street. In the blink of an eye, his small back was mixed in with the crowds of people, and he disappeared from view.

“Ah...!” A short cry slipped out of Haruyuki, and he reflexively started to chase the boy. But when he had taken two steps forward, he brought himself to a stop.

He couldn’t rush this. Cerberus had answered Haruyuki’s call and come very close to the meeting place; he’d shown his face in the real world. For a Burst Linker, exposing yourself in the real held a very serious significance. So the next chance they had, he would come even closer than he had today.

Right. Soon, for sure...

“I’m sure you’ll meet again soon.” Hearing this voice immediately behind him, Haruyuki turned around and found Kuroyukihime there with a take-out drink cup in one hand. Smiling faintly, she nodded once and held out the cup.

Instantly, he was conscious of the thirst in his dry throat, and Haruyuki bowed his head with a “Thank you” as he accepted it from her. He put the straw to his mouth and drank half of the cold oolong tea in one gulp. He let out a long breath, and then, gazing at Kuroyukihime’s face, he said, “...You’re right. I’ll go to Nakano again. And then I’ll duel him however many times.”

“Mmm. Good.” Kuroyukihime assented with a smile and pat-

ted him on the back.

With this action, he finally remembered—immediately before they'd moved to this location, Haruyuki had asked her a question, but he hadn't yet heard the answer.

“Um, I'm sorry about before, interrupting our conversation.” After apologizing, he asked again, “Um...Aqua Current, the one who helped me out in the Battle Royale, do you...maybe know her?”

Kuroyukihime's face was suspicious at first, but she soon nodded sharply. “Mmm. I do. Current was my old—and my very important—comrade.”

“She...‘was’...So then you must have a lot more you want to talk about.” Haruyuki had a sudden thought and he quickly continued, “R-right. Current might still be on the matching list for this area. If you requested a duel, couldn't you see her one more time?”

“...Mmm...” Kuroyukihime hung her head and took a deep breath, but rather than uttering the Burst Link command to start a duel, this changed into a long sigh. “...No, we'll have another chance to meet some other time...,” she murmured, and it seemed to him that the faint smile on her face contained several emotions, but Haruyuki could do nothing but nod.

The pedestrian traffic was interrupted for a moment, and the vehicles on Oume Highway also stopped at a red light. In the silence that was born, Haruyuki gave voice to words containing his own heartfelt emotion. “I guess so. So...some other time.”

“I'm sorry.” The response he got was not from Kuroyukihime, but from someone who had taken up position behind her at some point. “That ‘some other time’ is now.”

After passing through two seconds of stiffness, Kuroyukihime

whirled around, and Haruyuki sent his gaze flying ahead to the right.

A person, likely a girl, was standing there. She looked to be the same age as him, or maybe a little older, but she wasn't wearing a uniform. On her lower half, slim denim capris with sneakers; on her upper half, a three-quarter-sleeve summer knit. The Neurolinker around her neck was a semitransparent white. Her hair was in a bob that curled in slightly at the bottom, and a pair of red-framed glasses accented her defined, clear features. She was completely expressionless, but her somehow transparent eyes alone flickered with light, like the surface of water. Like a small window reflecting her shaken heart.

“Who—?” The mouth he had opened to ask, “Who exactly are you?” froze where it was.

He had met this person somewhere before. That afterimage of a memory he'd also sensed during the duel came back to life somewhere deep inside his head; Haruyuki bit his lip with the frustration of not being able to remember despite how badly he wanted to.

The girl in the glasses looked at him, then at Kuroyukihime, frozen silent next to him, and smiled faintly. After bowing lightly, she turned to Haruyuki and uttered in a voice that was a bit husky, “It's been a while, Silver Crow.”

“Oh, um, hi—” Reflexively, he started to lower his head and then froze once more. *C-c-c-c-c-cracked in the real?!* He lurched back, but the girl stopped him with her right hand and took a small rectangular object out of the shoulder bag slung across her body.

When he looked, he saw it was a thin tablet terminal that seemed a bit out of date. Her fingers danced across the touch panel, and then she turned it around and showed it to him. Displayed on the eighteen-centimeter screen was a photo. It depicted

a person from the chest up. Chubby face, messy hair, round eyes open wide, staring blankly, this idiotic face of a boy—no matter how he looked at it, it was Haruyuki's own. And not just that. The text SILVER CROW was quite clear in the bottom of the photo, and it was even dated: 11/09/2046.

“Wh...Wh-wha...?” *Wh-wh-wh-why do you have this picture?!* Haruyuki was faltering once more.

“...Which is to say,” the girl said, “no need to worry about being cracked in the real at this stage.”

Even with all this new information, he couldn't simply accept it with an “Oh, all right.” Still stiff as a board, Haruyuki continued to glare at himself on the screen.

Here Kuroyukihime finally spoke, albeit softly. “...Curren...?”

And then, putting the tablet terminal back into her bag, the girl pushed her red glasses up at the bridge with a finger and turned to face Kuroyukihime for the first time. She blinked twice or so before narrowing her eyes as though dazzled and then nodding lightly but assuredly. “A pleasure to meet you in the real. And...it's been a while, Lotus. The last time I spoke to you was... two and a half years ago.”

This response had two meanings. First, that this girl in glasses was Aqua Current, the level one with the flowing-water armor who had helped Haruyuki in the Battle Royale earlier. And second, that she did indeed have a deep bond with Kuroyukihime—or rather, the Black King, Black Lotus.

But that wasn't all. Current had some kind of connection with Haruyuki, too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have a photo of him in the real—and from six months ago, at that—and there'd be no explanation for why she saved him from Argon Array's attack. But why couldn't he remember the details of the “some kind”?

Slammed with maximal frustration, Haruyuki unconsciously hit his own head with his right hand. He went to bop himself one more time, but Current quickly reached out to stay his hand.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault you can’t remember.”

“...Huh...? What do you mean...?”

Current turned toward a dumbfounded Haruyuki and abruptly said, “I’ll explain everything once I *recover your memory*. But for that, we’ll need a safe place where we can relax. Any ideas?”

He shelved his questions for the time being and exchanged a glance with Kuroyukihime before nodding sharply.

“Um...If you don’t mind walking a little.”

3

The Nega Nebulus strategy meeting room and frontline base—in other words, the Arita living room, situated on the twenty-third floor of wing B of a mixed-use, high-rise condo north of Koenji Station. By the time Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and the girl in glasses who was apparently Aqua Current arrived there, the time was six forty-five PM.

For Haruyuki, who boasted a high-fuel-consumption physique that ran counter to the times, now his hunger meter was approaching the red zone. However, until at least half of the mountain of questions and mysteries that had piled up were resolved, even if he ate dinner, he wouldn't be able to taste it.

Thus, after showing the girls to the sofa set, Haruyuki poured three glasses of cold tea in the kitchen and piled some roasted-plum mochi rice cakes, wrapped in seaweed, on a wooden plate for a meager source of provisional sustenance. But on his way back to the sofa with the tray, he stopped short.

For some reason, the sight of Kuroyukihime and Aqua Current sitting across from each other lanced his heart. The two of them were staring at each other silently; it was as though they each deeply wanted the other to interact, while at the same time they were trying to distance themselves. This mood very strongly reminded him of Kuroyukihime and Fuko Kurasaki/Sky Raker in the period right after they were reunited.

“...Sorry to keep you waiting,” Haruyuki said, and he set the tray down on the glass table before placing a mug of cold green tea in front of each girl. The room was a little dim, so he went to turn the lights higher, only to change his mind and open the

south curtains all the way instead. The light of the evening sun pushing through the rain clouds departing to the east, dyed a golden color, filled the window, making him recall the last scene of the Ice stage battle, whether he wanted to or not.

“...The rainy season will be over soon, hmm?” Kuroyukihime asked.

Haruyuki nodded. “The latest weather report said July fifth.”

“One more week, then? There are a few things I’d like to take care of before that...Thanks for the tea.” Kuroyukihime took her glass in hand, and the girl opposite her also thanked him before putting her glass to her lips.

Haruyuki sat down at the foot of the table and took a drink himself, with Current on his right. Once all three had had a chance to breathe, Current casually remarked, “Right, we’ll start, then.”

From the bag beside her, she brought up a portable XSB cable with a round cord reel. She pulled out one of the plugs and offered it to Haruyuki.

“Huh...? Um, uh.”

“Direct connection’s easiest. Hurry.”

Left with no other choice, he took the plug and then glanced to his left, where Kuroyukihime gave him a faint, wry smile. “If it’s necessary, then you have no choice. See you in a bit.”

“O-okay. I’ll be just a minute, then.” Haruyuki inserted the plug into his direct terminal.

However, Current, who had already connected the other end, spoke immediately.

“Burst Link.”

In subjective time, it had been an acceleration of about ten seconds—so not even one-tenth of a second in reality. So short that the instant they returned, Kuroyukihime murmured as if dumbfounded, “That was a quick trip.”

To speak of what had happened in the direct duel, Aqua Current, having appeared at the minimum distance from Silver Crow, briskly walked over to him and placed her water-covered hands on his helmet, pushed her forehead up against his, and said simply, “Memory Free.”

That was all. So even after the acceleration was over, it was hard for Haruyuki to believe anything had changed. Current wound the recovered XSB cable back up and tucked it away in her bag, so the thing that was to be done had been done, he supposed. But...

Pssh, pssh, pssh.

Haruyuki could hear the sound of water flowing, and he looked back, wondering if he had forgotten to turn off the tap in the kitchen. But when he thought about it, if that were the case, a warning would have been displayed in his vision already. And what he was hearing wasn't the noise of flowing water roughly splashing against the bottom of the sink, but rather the light murmuring of a small brook deep in the mountains. When he listened carefully, he came to realize that the source of the sound wasn't outside himself, but rather inside. The cool, clear water flowed through his head and brought back routes that had been blocked.

“.....Huh? What?” Haruyuki's jaw dropped, and he stared at the (probably) girl in glasses sitting to his right. “...Aqua Current...So you're *that* Aqua Current...aren't you? Just like Raker and Maiden. One of the Four Elements—a senior executive of the first Nega Nebulus.”

Why had he forgotten something that important until now? Hadn't he just heard Aqua Current's name during the mission to

rescue Ardor Maiden that had taken place a mere nine days earlier? And in this very living room?

Nega Nebulus, which two and a half years earlier had ranked in power alongside the current six Great Legions, had dared to attack the Castle that sat at the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field. But they had been routed by the Super-level Enemies that guarded the four gates—known as the Four Gods—and destroyed. At that time, the leader Black Lotus and the wind elemental, Sky Raker, had fought Byakko, the guardian of the west gate, and just barely managed to escape, but the three senior members who had attacked the other gates had all been trapped in Unlimited EK.

On Suzaku's altar at the south gate was Utai Shinomiya, aka Ardor Maiden, the fire elemental. On Genbu's altar at the north gate was earth, Graphite Edge. And on Seiryu's altar at the east gate was water, Aqua Current.

It was true that at the time, his head had been full with the mission to rescue Maiden, their top priority, but even so, it was pathetic that he would forget the name of an Element so easily. Haruyuki held his head—and its meager memory-storage capacity—in his hand and groaned.

But surprisingly, that wasn't the end of it. In his mind, another route opened up, and a new, large-volume memory flowed into his mind:

Aqua Current. Also known as “The One.” The reason she was called that was because she was a particularly special level-one Burst Linker. Despite the fact that normally, level-one newbies had their heads full of earning points for themselves, Current had made a name for herself as “the bouncer,” accepting requests to guard newbie Linkers who were on the verge of running out of points.

Specifically, she took requests from level-one and -two Burst Linkers and fought in a tag team with that Burst Linker until

their remaining points were back up to fifty. Her remuneration for this protection was not points, but rather exposure in the real. When the Burst Linker went to the café where they were to meet, they entered their avatar name in a tablet terminal left at the specified seat, and a camera app took a photo of their face. This photo was sent to the terminal belonging to Current, who hid herself nearby.

As for why Haruyuki had such detailed knowledge of the procedure, it was because he had been Aqua Current's client. Last fall, back when he was still very much a little chick, he had gotten so carried away in his delight at having finally gotten over three hundred points that he'd completely forgotten to leave himself a safe margin when he'd gone up to level two.

As a result, his points had dropped down to a mere eight, putting him in the desperate, perilous situation of having Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled if he lost even one duel. The person who rescued him from this tight spot was the mysterious One, Aqua Current. In the Jimbocho area, they had fought a succession of level-three and -four opponents in tag-team matches to bring Haruyuki's points up to seventy. If she hadn't guarded him, he might have lost Brain Burst long ago—no; he almost certainly would have.

“...Curren.” When Haruyuki lifted his head, he called her name with a totally different feeling than he had up to that point. He stared into the eyes of the faintly smiling, silent girl, eyes reminiscent of the shimmering surface of water. “Curren. I—I...all this time, I've...wanted to see you.”

The instant he said this, a wave of a certain kind of Incarnate was launched at him from the left, like something catching fire; but as if in a trance, he continued on without noticing it. “I wanted to see you and say thank you. Because you were there for me, because you saved me, I'm here...” He was unable to put the rest into words; instead, something hot welled up in both eyes.

Aqua Current turned to Haruyuki and nodded slowly before replying gently, “I wanted to see you again, too. I wanted to meet you and hear all your stories.”

More flames. A second wave of emotion came at him, and Haruyuki finally turned his gaze toward the source. Instantly, his entire body tensed up: Behind the quietly smiling Kuroyukihime, he saw an attack-power overlay.



“Haruyuki?”

“Y-yeah?!”

“Sorry to interrupt when you’re having fun, but perhaps you could explain? I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Y-y-yeah!” Bobbing his head up and down, Haruyuki told her the sequence of events of meeting Aqua Current, half in a daze. Kuroyukihime listened quietly, nodding occasionally, and Haruyuki wrapped it all up with, “So that’s the story.”

“...You idiot!!” Her thunderous roar ripped through him for the first time in a while. Kuroyukihime leaned forward on the sofa, pinched his left cheek tightly, and started ranting without pause. “You were near death at the point when you reached level two?! ...No, I won’t reproach you after all this time for leveling up without leaving a margin of safety. That’s my fault; I didn’t teach you well enough. But why did you not come and tell me immediately?! If you had just told me, I would have given you however many points you needed!”

“B-but back then you were in the ICU in the hospital, and you weren’t allowed visitors—”

“This game isn’t some demo or off-the-shelf product! Even if we couldn’t direct, we could have dueled via the hospital net, couldn’t we?!”

“B-but back then, your remaining points were—”

“I got them back in no time at all hunting Enemies!”

...Kee-hee.

Abruptly, there was restrained laughter, and both Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki turned their heads at the same time.

Aqua Current, who had remained essentially expressionless this whole time, had covered her mouth with a hand, and her shoulders were shaking in tiny increments.

Huh, Haruyuki thought simply. So Curren can really laugh.

But Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki's cheek still pinched between her fingers, opened both eyes wide in surprise. After blinking several times, she let slip in a completely different tone, "...Curren, I've never seen you laugh like that before...Well, this is the first time we've met in the real, so maybe that's to be expected, though..."

Aqua Current continued her stifled laughter, but finally, she cleared her throat and said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing because it was funny. I was just happy...I mean, Lotus, it was like back then, back when you used to fight with Raker and Graph in front of me and Maiden..."

As she touched the red frames of her glasses, the young woman closed her eyes, and when she lifted her head again, her face was composed again. She sat up straight and set her hands on the knees of her jeans, then focused her transparent gaze on Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime. "I'll introduce myself once more. I'm Aqua Current. My real name is Akira Himi."

After a slight pause, the girl with the name Akira—at once a girl's name and a boy's name; very fitting to the neutral air around her—turned toward Kuroyukihime and dipped her head. "Lotus. Silver Crow had no choice but to keep quiet about his connection with me, because I locked away the relevant part of his memory."

Five minutes later.

Once Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime had also finished introducing themselves and they were mostly settled on what to call each other in the real, Haruyuki confirmed with Akira once more. "Um, so then, eight months ago, you sealed my memory with the

Incarnate technique Memory Leak, and you unlocked it with the Memory Free you used when we direct dueled just now. Is that it?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“B-but why would you...?”

“You already know half the reason. Because you saw my real face, Haru.”

“Oh? And how did you crack Akira in the real, Haruyuki?” Kuroyukihime asked, mildly surprised.

“No,” Haruyuki said, scratching the back of his head. “It wasn’t like I cracked her on purpose—I’m just always clumsy...I tripped when I went to the washroom in the designated café, and Akira just happened to be nearby...” The memory of slamming into her, knocking her down, and then accidentally touching her inappropriately finally came back to life, and Haruyuki slammed his mouth shut. Body frozen, he moved his eyes and saw the Akira in question picking up a plum rice cake, looking as though there was nothing at all to tell, so he omitted that detail as he finished the story. “...Akira’s bag fell, and the tablet we saw before came out, and my picture was on it...”

“I see.” Kuroyukihime nodded, albeit with a slightly doubtful look on her face. “So even Aqua Current was done in by Haruyuki’s powers of carelessness, hmm?”

“N-no, I mean, they’re not that great.”

“I wasn’t complimenting you...So, Akira, what was the other reason?”

Their eyes turned on her, Akira pointed the rice cake between her fingers squarely at Haruyuki. “I also explained that to Haru at the time.”

“Y-you did? ...Um...” He replayed the memories he had only just recovered and finally arrived at the relevant scene. As she was on the verge of using her Incarnate technique on him, Haruyuki was pretty sure she had said something like, “...‘For me and you to meet—in other words, it is still too early for Curren, one of the Four Elements, to get involved with the newly restored Nega Nebulus...’ Was that it?”

“Exactly. I thought the first one to rejoin you should be Sky Raker. And anyway, Maiden, Graph, and I...”

“You’re in Unlimited EK...yes?” Kuroyukihime finished with a pained look, and Akira nodded softly, lowering her eyes.

As he looked at each of them in turn, silent for the time being, Haruyuki realized—no, remembered—something and took a sharp breath. He had felt it in the middle of the Battle Royale earlier, but this conversation highlighted one massive contradiction for him:

Akira’s duel avatar, Aqua Current, was sealed at the east gate of the Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field. In this condition, Akira was active in the normal duel field as The One, a level-one bodyguard. But.

“...B-but, um, you can only go into the Unlimited Neutral Field from level four,” Haruyuki said, finally blurting out the conclusion his brain had come to, and the two girls turned their eyes on him. They blinked together several times before Akira touched the bridge of her glasses and opened her mouth.

“That’s a natural question. In fact, I wondered when you’d ask it, Haru.”

Next, Kuroyukihime nodded slightly, her brow furrowed. “The answer to that question is simple. When Nega Nebulus took on the challenge of the Castle attack, Curren was level seven.”

“S-seven?! That’s the same as Maiden now! So how did she get to level one...?” Completely baffled, Haruyuki gaped, only to have a voice come to him from deep in his mind. Refreshing like a breeze parting tall grasses, clear like a polished sword, this voice was that of the mysterious young samurai avatar he’d met inside the Castle. A precious friend, he had first introduced himself as “Trilead Tetroxide,” and when they were parting, he’d revealed his real name: Azure Air.

Haruyuki was pretty sure that when they were considering the route for Haruyuki’s and Utai’s escape, Azure Air had said he couldn’t recommend the east gate because the God Seiryu, the Super-level Enemy guarding it, had a terrifying special power.

“...Level...Drain,” he murmured.

Kuroyukihime shrugged lightly. “...So you know it? That’s exactly right. In order to allow for all of her subordinates in the east-gate attack squad to retreat, Curren stepped up onto Seiryu’s altar to bravely fight. She was hit with the enemy’s unique attack several times, and as a result—”

“My level dropped all at once.” As a Burst Linker, this was probably the greatest possible damage you could think of—excluding total point loss, of course—but the words came smoothly from Akira’s mouth. She took a small bite of the rice cake pinched between her fingers and a sip of cold tea, and then she smiled faintly at Haruyuki and his wide-open eyes—as well as at the tense look on Kuroyukihime’s face. “But I don’t think of that as me being more severely injured than Maiden, Graph, Raker, or you, Lotus. There is no difference in the strength of the Four Gods, the fearsomeness of them. When I was hit with the painless Drain attack, Maiden was being roasted in the flames of Suzaku, Graph was being crushed by a super mass, and you and Raker were being ripped apart by Byakko’s claws and fangs. In terms of simple pain and suffering, you all had it much worse.”

“...But, Curren—pain in the virtual world disappears once the

battle is over...But the damage you took...”

“Of course, immediately after my level dropped, I was a little—more than a little—shocked, but it hasn’t been all bad. As the bouncer, I’ve been able to help lots of kids in trouble like Haru, and because of that...There’s no need to make that face, Lotus.” Akira’s intonation didn’t change much, but her voice was still full of emotion. She paused for a minute before starting again. “...But setting aside the Level Drain, the fact that if you go too deep into their territory, you will indeed end up in Unlimited EK is the same for Seiryu and all the other Gods, so...even after I found out that Nega Nebulus had reformed, I couldn’t make up my mind to contact you before now. Of course I wanted to come back. The truth is, I wanted to come back so badly, I could hardly stand it. But if I rejoined the Legion, Lotus, you...” She closed her mouth there and hung her head.

In her place, Kuroyukihime slowly nodded. “Right after we were reunited two weeks ago, Maiden also said the exact same thing. If she rejoined, the new Nega Nebulus—no, its master, me—I would once again challenge the Four Gods to rescue her from the seal at the Castle. As a result, there might end up being more people sealed there. She was afraid of that.”

“It’s only natural to be afraid. I mean, you finally come back, Lotus—Sach—to plant the Black flag in Suginami. I don’t want that tragedy to unfold again.”

The nickname “Sach” that Akira used for Kuroyukihime was an abbreviation of the “Sacchi” he had heard Fuko Kurasaki and Utai Shinomiya use. With her simple tone, the bookish girl was clearly from the planet Impatience—although not to the extent that Pard was—and she opened her mouth again before Kuroyukihime could say anything.

“But, Sach, Haru...you pulled off a magnificent rescue of Maiden from Suzaku’s altar. When I heard that rumor on the wind, I was just so happy. I kept thinking the day would definitely

come when I'd meet you again and release the seal on Haru's memories..."

"...And so that was today, then?" Kuroyukihime remarked with a smirk.

Akira nodded once, but then shook her head lightly. "The truth is, I was planning to wait a little longer. But a situation came up that won't allow me to bide my time." The sepia-tinged eyes on the other side of her glasses were colored with a sharp light. "...As you know, ever since the former Nega Nebulus was destroyed two and a half years ago, I've been protecting low-level Linkers as the bouncer. There are several reasons for that, but one of them is to gather information. The Burst Linkers I help convey to me critical information they learn in the Accelerated World even after they reach the middle zone...insofar as this doesn't interfere with the activities of the Legion they belong to, naturally."

Haruyuki nodded at this, with a powerful understanding. If his memory hadn't been deleted—no, sealed—he, too, would no doubt have felt at least some obligation to return the favor and would have stayed in contact with Aqua Current.

"So even while I've refused contact with the new Nega Nebulus," Akira continued, her voice strained somehow while still calm, "I've managed to get a grasp of sorts on the series of events happening over the last while in the Accelerated World. Specifically, the large-scale terrorist incident due to a fourth-quadrant Incarnate technique in the Hermes' Cord race and the revival of the Armor of Catastrophe, the order to purify the Armor made at the meeting of the Seven Kings, the plague of ISS kits and the Archangel Metatron appearing at Tokyo Midtown Tower, and... the purification and sealing of the Armor by Silver Crow."

The words she uttered so smoothly traced out the general course of the majority of events that had happened over the last month and a half, and it wasn't just Haruyuki opening his eyes wide in surprise; Kuroyukihime also stared as if stunned.

“Just like always, I suppose I should say. Your usual information-gathering powers show themselves once more, Curren.” Spreading her hands, Kuroyukihime explained to Haruyuki, “In Nega Nebulus before, Akira was in charge of information gathering and analysis. Her ability to pick up on fragments of rumors that we wouldn’t even notice and follow them to some key chunk of information was really magnificent.”

Praised by her former master, Akira murmured, slightly embarrassed, “Information is like water flowing through the pipes of a city. There’s always some leaking out of the seams and cracks, bit by bit, but no one’s paying attention.”

“W-wow...Is there really that much leakage in the water system?” Haruyuki asked, glancing back suddenly toward the kitchen again.

Akira nodded with a serious face and revealed an unexpected nugget of knowledge. “The leak rate at the beginning of this century within the Tokyo Metropolitan Waterworks was around five percent. Even now in the 2040s, one percent of the water flowing through the system in Tokyo disappears as leaked water. In terms of volume, that’s about fifteen million cubic meters.”

“F-fifteen. Million...So, like, in two-liter soda bottles, um...”

Before Haruyuki could launch the calculator app on his virtual desktop, Kuroyukihime quickly did the arithmetic in her head. “Seven and a half billion bottles. Even so, apparently, the amount of loss is fairly small compared with major cities in other countries...But, Akira, back when I was still level eight, I’m sure I remember you telling Graph, also level eight, to try leveling up first in order to get information on the level-nine sudden-death rules. Wasn’t that quite the strong-arming way of gathering information?” Kuroyukihime noted, a playful smile slipping across her face.

“Graph was in charge of sacrifices, so there was no problem,”

Akira responded coolly.

“Ha-ha-ha! ...Well, it’s true there really aren’t too many people as sour as Graph.”

Watching Kuroyukihime laugh with delight, Haruyuki reflected on the powerful warmth he felt.

Although some pressing circumstances had apparently pushed Nega Nebulus with their backs to the wall, now that Akira/Aqua Current was back, three of the Four Elements who had made up the senior executives of Nega Nebulus had returned. Of course, Current’s so-called real body was still sealed on the altar of the God Seiryu at the east gate of the Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but he had a feeling that the day when all four of them were completely restored, including Graphite Edge—who he still only knew by name—was definitely not far off. And it wasn’t just the Four Elements; the other Burst Linkers who had belonged to the old Legion would also come around one after another at some point.

That was when Kuroyukihime would be able to reclaim what she had lost. Once Nega Nebulus returned to being one of the seven Great Legions in both name and substance, Haruyuki wouldn’t be able to monopolize her the way he did now. It wasn’t that he wasn’t sad about that, but the fact that he was her sole child wouldn’t change. Plus, more than anything, it was still true that, in order to reach level ten—the objective of Kuroyukihime, and of Haruyuki himself—beefing up the Legion was a must.

He considered all of this as he bit into a plum rice cake, and Kuroyukihime abruptly reached out to stroke his scalp. “Hasty as always, hmm?”

He glanced at her kind smile, which looked as though she had been reading his thoughts, and shook his head quickly from side to side. “Uh— N-no, I wasn’t sad or anything. Not at all.”

“Well, you say that, and you’re basically confessing. Believe me. You and Takumu and Chiyuri are just as precious—if not more precious to me—than my old comrades. No matter how big the Legion might get, the you inside of me could never get smaller.”

“O-okay...” Haruyuki desperately pushed back the teary feeling welling up inside him.

“It’s okay to cry when you want to cry,” Akira said from his right, smiling. “If water isn’t always flowing, it gets stagnant.”

The Haruyuki from a little while before might have let his tears fall, unable to stop them here, but he resisted and responded, “Um...I’ll save them up until you formally rejoin the Legion, Akira.”

“You will? Then you should remember what you said to me immediately before I sealed your memory.”

“Uh, um...What did I say again...?” Even as he gave voice to this, the scene from the time was replaying in the back of his mind, as though Akira’s words had pumped it up. After Haruyuki had agreed to the direct duel with far too little in the way of wariness, Aqua Current had told him, “I’ll take all the points you have now as payment.” And to this, the words Haruyuki had said in reply...

“...I won’t fight you. I like you, and—”

Kree, kree. A fierce pressure assaulted his head, interrupting him. The source was Kuroyukihime’s five slender fingers still resting on his head. Even as she displayed a power on par with a duel avatar specializing in hold techniques, the smile on her lips did not disappear. Of course, this was her special attack: Ultimate Cool Kuroyukihime Smile.

“...I didn’t quite hear you. What did you say the reason you

didn't fight Curren was?"

"Uh, um...That, it's...I-like...um, very ladylike?—no, not that. Oh, I got it. What I meant was, in all *likelihood*, I could never beat you in terms of skills."

Kuroyukihime refuted Haruyuki's ever-so-masterful evasion with a cool, "There might be abilities in Brain Burst, but there aren't any skills." And then her face relaxed, as though that was the end of that. After finally bopping him lightly, she pulled her hand away from his head and took a rice cake between her own fingers. "But, well, you being like that, it's probably why Akira appeared like this in the real..."

She tossed the rice cake into her mouth and crunched on it, making a satisfying sound, and then drank down the rest of the tea in her glass. Haruyuki rose up in his seat to refill her glass, and Kuroyukihime checked him with a wave of her hand. She looked at Akira seated across from her with a serious expression and said:

"...I still have a number of things I'd like to ask, but let's set aside talk of the past for the time being. What's more important is the present and the future—the reason why you visited Suginami and contacted us today, Akira. Judging from the timing, I believe it's connected with the ISS kit or the Acceleration Research Society...So?"

Faced with this question, Akira nodded as she touched a fingertip to the bridge of her glasses. "As insightful as ever. The reason is both...Plus one more."

"Oh? And that is...?"

Haruyuki waited for Akira's response with the attitude that he'd already had too many surprises to count that day, so nothing he heard at that point would give him a shock. But the words she uttered had a power that easily blew away that resolve.

“...The Armor of Catastrophe.”

“...!!”

Kuroyukihime simply inhaled sharply, but Haruyuki reeled violently and very nearly flipped over the back of the sofa.

He somehow managed to regain his balance and, after taking a deep breath, shouted, “Th-that’s—! Th-the Armor—that curse has been completely purified. It’s supposed to be gone!!”

It had been a mere six days since Haruyuki had returned “The Disaster,” the Enhanced Armament known as the Armor of Catastrophe, to its original form, the Arc Destiny and the sacred sword Star Caster, and then sealed them away forever in a corner of the Unlimited Neutral Field. No matter what this Acceleration Research Society was, they wouldn’t have been able to lay a hand on that place now, and they absolutely must not be allowed to.

To begin with, scant minutes earlier, Aqua Current had said it herself, hadn’t she? That the Armor had been purified and sealed by Silver Crow.

As if to ease the shock Haruyuki had taken, Akira nodded once before continuing. “I don’t think the society will be able to bring back the Armor of Catastrophe itself. But they’re probably not planning recovery. Rather, they’re after rebirth.”

“R-rebirth? You mean...make it again?” Even Kuroyukihime’s voice was colored with fear as she asked this question.

Akira shifted her eyes directly forward and nodded once more. “The Acceleration Research Society was involved in the birth of the Armor of Catastrophe seven years ago...or so I’ve surmised. Is that correct?”

Question answered with a question, Haruyuki exchanged a look with his Legion master before they both nodded. This was

extremely confidential information, but there was absolutely no reason to hide it from Aqua Current, a former Element.

“Y-yes...I only have the super-vague proof of a dream I had while I was parasitized by the Armor, but I believe it. The ones who set a trap for Chrome Falcon and Saffron Blossom seven years ago and forced Fron into total point loss with an Unlimited EK were the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise...and senior member Argon Array.”

He felt like Akira’s eyes were shaken for the merest instant when she heard the names of Falcon and Saffron, but the orange light coming in through the windows reflected off the lenses of her glasses and hid her expression.

“They did...” Her voice was quiet, her head hanging slightly. “Then we must assume that it was also the Society’s intent to have the armor handed down over successive generations and so much blood spilled in the Accelerated World.”

“But I’m sure the one who gave the armor to the Fifth Disaster, Cherry Rook, was the Yellow King, Yellow Radio.” Kuroyukihime furrowed her brow. “That banana-head can’t possibility be an ally of the society?”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Akira lifted her face with a wry smile. “Radio loves traps and schemes, but he’s basically a ham who wants to be noticed.”

“A-a ham...” Haruyuki was stunned by this vicious cut of a single stroke, but Kuroyukihime only giggled.

“That’s definitely true. Radio’s not satisfied unless he climbs up onto his own stage. His color’s simply too different from the secret maneuverings of the society. But then, was it Radio’s own intent to obtain the Armor during the subjugation of the Fourth Disaster and use it as a key to entrap Scarlet Rain?”

Haruyuki nodded, pulled in. “And the fact that the armor was transferred from the Fifth, Cherry Rook, to me, the Sixth, was a completely coincidental series of events. No one could have predicted that Niko would come to us in Nega Nebulus for help, or that I would be the one to strike the final blow on the Fifth Disaster. Even the guys in the Society.”

Akira accepted these remarks with neither agreement nor denial and then dropped her voice. “...In other words, I think it’s like this: It doesn’t matter to the Society who transfers the Armor to whom or what kind of tragedy is brought about. What they’re after is the continuation of the cycle of calamity for as long as necessary—the Armor being inherited and strengthened. And then they recover it once it’s sufficiently strong and use it for their final objective...”

“Oh...!” The instant he heard this, Haruyuki had a memory flash to life in the back of his mind. He screwed up his face and tried to replay the scene. “Um...Nearly a week ago in the Unlimited Neutral Field, we split the armor into the two Enhanced Armaments it was made of, but right before that, the society’s vice president, Black Vise, appeared and said something to me. I’m pretty sure it was something about how it was earlier than scheduled, but they were going to have to recover and analyze the Armor. And that, *unfortunately*, I would have to leave the Accelerated World.” The memory was hazy because he had been very much on the edge in terms of his mental state at the time, but he was sure of the overall idea of it.

Hearing Haruyuki’s—well, Black Vise’s—words, the two girls looked at each other and then nodded, their looks turning serious.

“I knew it.” Akira opened her mouth first. “They have a long-term plan. I think they have some final target for use of the Armor. This is just my supposition, but they were going to take the Armor recovered from Haru, equip it on someone who would be the Seventh, and then complete Chrome Disaster. Or perhaps

this is even just one part of a larger plan...”

“The Seventh? That’s quite the number, hmm?” Kuroyukihime said, annoyed, and looked at Haruyuki before softening her mouth and continuing. “So then by purifying and sealing the Armor, the Sixth, Haruyuki, ruined the grand plan the Acceleration Research Society had been working on for seven years—though, when you think about acceleration in the Unlimited Neutral Field, ten times, a hundred times that long. Once again, giga GJ.”

“Are you speaking Ash or Pard now?” Haruyuki replied with a grin, and Kuroyukihime laughed, too, but Akira for some reason stopped moving entirely for a moment. A little later, a faint smile rose up across her lips. Haruyuki was about to ask her if something was the matter, but before he could, she said:

“...The Armor of Catastrophe is gone, thanks to your hard work, Haru. I said this before, too, but the Society doesn’t have the option of bringing the Armor back. But that doesn’t mean they’re the type to quietly give up.”

“Right,” Kuroyukihime murmured. “So then that’s where the ‘rebirth’ you mentioned comes in.”

“Yes.” Akira slowly nodded. “The Acceleration Research Society is trying to repeat now what they did seven years ago...is what I think. They’ll call up an explosive hatred and sadness, pour this negative energy into the Enhanced Armament that will be the vessel, and give it a cursed power. I feel that several of the incidents taking place in the Accelerated World right now strongly hint at this possibility.”

“Hmm...I don’t doubt your analytical abilities, Akira, but it’s not a phenomenon that can be reproduced as simply as that, is it? As I remember it, Chrome Disaster was born from a fusion of several different elements...Isn’t that so, Haruyuki?”

She turned her eyes on Haruyuki, who nodded deeply. “Yes.” Counting off on the fingers of his right hand, he listed the factors that made up the Armor of Catastrophe. “Um...First, the initial Disaster, Chrome Falcon. And his partner, Saffron Blossom. The Legend-class Enemy that brought Saffron to total point loss. The Enhanced Armament, ‘the Destiny,’ which took in Falcon’s sadness and hatred and transformed into the Armor. And I don’t know if this was a requirement or not, but the greatsword Star Caster with Saffron’s heart in it...At the very least, these elements were required to produce the Armor of Catastrophe...”

“And of course, they’re all relatively rare,” Kuroyukihime murmured. “It goes without saying that there are few metal-color avatars, and fewer still if you’re looking for one with a fixed partner. And rarest of all is the Destiny as the vessel...It is, after all, one of the Seven Arcs.”

Haruyuki and Akira were silent for a moment, and then Haruyuki reached out for a rice cake, the mountain of which had dropped by half at some point, and grabbed one before setting it on the edge of the wooden plate. “The Arcs confirmed to exist in the Accelerated World right now are...the alpha, which is the Blue King’s greatsword, ‘The Impulse.’” He put a new rice cake to the side. “And the beta, the staff of the Purple King, ‘The Tempest.’ The Green King’s large shield, ‘The Strife,’ the gamma. And...the epsilon, ‘The Infinity,’ the longsword of Trilead, who we met in the Castle.”

He had lined up four rice cakes by this point. Lifting his head, he looked at each girl in turn. “It’s just these four, isn’t it? The whereabouts of the delta, ‘The Luminary,’ are unknown. And the theta, ‘The Destiny,’ is of course sealed away, while the eta, ‘The Fluctuating Light,’ is in the deepest part of the Castle, where no one can touch it.”

When Haruyuki closed his mouth, Kuroyukihime offered a slight, wry smile and shrugged. “When you list them all like that, it does seem like there are a lot. But it’s true that there are cur-

rently four—no, perhaps three—the society might be able to move on. No matter how powerful they might be, they can't touch Trilead, who lives in the Castle with the epsilon.” She reached out her right hand, picked up one of the rice cakes sitting on the side of the plate, and bit into it with a *crunch*.

Akira stared for a while at the remaining three, until she finally shrugged, too. “I think the remaining three are equally difficult to interfere with. None of the kings would ever part with their Arc, and the only way to take their Enhanced Armament would be to make the king lose all their points. And even the Acceleration Research Society shouldn't have that kind of battle power,” Akira said, taking another rice cake.

Haruyuki recovered the remaining two cakes and tossed them into his mouth together, munching on them for a while before speaking. “Um...So just to cover all the bases, there's no Enhanced Armament in the Accelerated World as powerful as the Seven Arcs, right?”

Akira and Kuroyukihime blinked twice, quickly, and then shook their heads simultaneously.

“I don't think there are.”

“There shouldn't be. I mean, to begin with, the Seven Arcs are called that because they have exceptional capacities. You only came up against Grandé's shield the one time, but you felt the ridiculous defensive power it holds, yes?”

“Y-yeah, that was...”

“Although in his case, well, his body is so hard it almost breaks the rules, too. Mmm, so then that means, conversely, if a Burst Linker born with the majority of their potential given over to an Enhanced Armament were to pour all of their level-up bonuses into increasing the performance of that armament...Hmm, hmm...I wonder how that would go.” Kuroyukihime cocked her

head to one side as she pulled on this thread of reason, and one Burst Linker popped into Haruyuki's mind, whether he liked it or not.

“So, like, if Ash just kept focusing on bringing up his bike, that machine would become an Arc-level Enhanced Armament. Is that it?”

They looked at each other for a moment or two and then erupted in laughter at the same time. *Apologies, Ash, but no matter how many missiles and machine guns and rocket launchers are added on as equipment, it's a little beyond belief that your beloved machine would ever join the ranks of the Seven Arcs.*

Thinking about this led his brain to another thought, though, and Haruyuki furrowed his brow. But before his thinking could get anywhere, Kuroyukihime cleared her throat and turned to Akira.

“Mmm...Sorry for the digression. In short, even if the Acceleration Research Society is planning the birth of a second Armor, there isn't an Arc they could use as a vessel...”

“Yes. I'm in agreement on that.”

“And there are other elements missing. The true nature of the Armor's strength was built up and cultivated through the long years of generations of wearers until it built up an aggregate of negative Incarnate to the point where it had a pseudospirit. That was the strength of 'the Beast,' as Haruyuki put it.”

At this remark from Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki set aside what he was trying to remember and nodded deeply. “Yeah. He was really amazing. He could predict the enemy's attack from start to finish, even Incarnate techniques, and then he'd display the attack trajectory and type of technique even in my field of view. On top of that, he learned all of the special techniques of the previous Disasters, so I could just use them as much as I wanted. Like the

combo of Laser Sword after Flash Blink, seriously the strongest...” Haruyuki rattled on and on, both hands clenched tightly.

For a while, Kuroyukihime simply stared with wide eyes before finally chuckling dryly, as though fondly exasperated. “The way you talk sounds like you are quite firmly in support of the Beast.”

“Oh! N-no, that’s not it...”

“But, well, I understand what you’re trying to say. It was precisely because the Beast was so strong that Chrome Disaster was strong. That’s it, hmm? In other words, even if those kids in the Society succeed in producing an Armor of Catastrophe Mark Two, with parasitic abilities and the power to control the mind, to build up the negative incarnate to that extent and raise it up until it exhibits the same level of performance as the Mark One, it will be years—and actually, we can probably assume it will take even longer when we consider that they can’t use an Arc as a vessel. Are they planning something so long-term at this late stage?” This final question was directed at Akira.

The executive in charge of intelligence in the first Nega Nebulus didn’t answer right away, but rather turned her sepia-brown eyes toward the evening sky beyond the windows. She narrowed her eyes almost as if she could see something there, and after a few seconds, began to speak in a hushed tone. “...The aggregate of negative Incarnate. There is one other thing in the Accelerated World that description applies to. And it continues to grow even now, with every passing second...”

“...!!”

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime both inhaled sharply, having finally realized what Akira meant. The negative will of hostility and hatred of many Burst Linkers, i.e., something that absorbed and accumulated negative Incarnate. The same growth logic as the Beast that lived in the Armor of Catastrophe, but much more

blackly sinister.

“...The ISS kit main body...,” Haruyuki murmured hoarsely.

“Curren, have you...seen it?” Kuroyukihime asked. “The ISS kit main body in the Tokyo Midtown Tower?” But here she pinched her lips closed and then quickly bowed her head. “Sorry. There’s no way you could have seen it. You’re still sealed at the east gate of the Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field...”

“No need to apologize, Lotus. The attack on the Castle was the will of all members, including the Four Elements. And whatever the result, that night when all of us in the Legion marched toward the Castle together is a precious memory to me, even now,” Akira replied gently. Then her tone returned to normal as she continued, “...I haven’t seen the ISS kit main body myself. A Burst Linker I was guarding a little earlier equipped the kit. That kid sent me information on the kit performance and the structure of the enhancement and amplification. From that, I inferred the fact that the kits have a centralized power structure.”

“...Um, is that person...?” *Are they okay?* Haruyuki’s eyes asked.

“Not a word in three days.” Akira shook her head slightly. “The mental control of the ISS kit has probably increased beyond the relationship with me.” Her tone and expression were as controlled as ever, but even still, Haruyuki caught a flicker of sadness in the eyes behind the glasses.

It was only natural. For Aqua Current, The One, the sole bodyguard in the Accelerated World, all of the newbies she accepted work from, tag-teamed with, and saved from the danger of total point loss were, in a certain sense, something like her children.

“Three days...If it’s only been three days, then maybe if we use Lime Bell’s special attack...,” Haruyuki said unconsciously. What came to mind, of course, was the Legion Petit Paquet in the Seta-

gaya area. This Legion was made up of Chocolat Puppeteer with her unique chocolate armor, together with her parent and her child, but the latter had been contaminated with the ISS kit.

However, through Chocolat's desperate cries and Lime Bell's Citron Call Mode II—an ability to reverse time—they had been able to remove their kits and return them all the way back to the sealed-card form. In principle, it should have been possible to do the same thing for Aqua Current's client.

Akira stared at Haruyuki for a moment, and then quickly shook her head once more. “Thanks. But the situation can no longer be resolved by dealing with each individual terminal. Putting together all the witness information, the number of kit users is increasing by more than ten people every day. Most likely, once it surpasses a certain number, I think this will become something like a pandemic.”

“...Then the objective of the ISS kit multiplication is to collect massive amounts of negative Incarnate and pour that into the Armor of Catastrophe Mark Two. Is that what you think, Akira...?”

Akira pulled her jaw back slightly at the serious look on Kuroyukihime's face. “I don't know if that's the entire objective. But I do think there's no doubt this is one way of using it.”

“Mmm. And the reason?”

“The reason is why I appeared today in Suginami...before you and Haru, Sach.”

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime gasped slightly in tandem at these unexpected words and waited for the rest of the explanation.

“A new metal color has appeared in the Accelerated World, unexpectedly strong, despite his parent being unknown and him

not belonging to a Legion.’ Ever since I heard that rumor a week or so ago, I’ve been gathering information. I’ve sat in the Gallery myself any number of times, although I’ve been using a dummy avatar for viewing.”

“...Wolfram Cerberus...?”

“Yes.” Akira nodded lightly at Haruyuki’s hoarse question. “He...Everything about him, from the way he appeared, to the extraordinary strength, the fact that he’s a metal color, and even the overall air he has about him...called to mind a Burst Linker who disappeared a very, very long time ago. The Second Chrome Disaster, Magnesium Drake.”

“...!!”

Haruyuki gasped. He had only just heard that name the day before from Kuroyukihime over lunch break. This Burst Linker had appeared at the dawn of the Accelerated World and had become exceedingly popular, but then was suddenly swallowed up by the Armor, became the Second Disaster, and was subjugated after a great deal of blood was spilled.

“...Did you know Drake personally, Curren?” Kuroyukihime asked.

Akira nodded neatly. “We dueled and spoke any number of times. And because my power was water and his fire, we saw each other as rivals. This was before I joined Nega Nebulus, though.”

She lifted her head and looked outside once more before continuing with eyes that seemed to peer into the distant past.

“...I didn’t get to spend very much time with my parent, so there are more than a few things Drake taught me. How to use my own power; duel techniques; mental preparation as a Burst Linker...So I saw us as rivals, but also friends. However, Drake suddenly disappeared one day, and when he came back, he had

already become a different person. Wrapped in the Armor of Catastrophe, he took out a lot of Burst Linkers in normal duels, and in the Unlimited Neutral Field, too. He didn't so much as hesitate when he burned me up with his flames, too, several times more powerful than they had been before."

"...Curren..." Haruyuki unconsciously called her name.

Akira smiled at him as if to say she was okay. "This was already a long, long time ago. But this past Sunday, when I saw Wolfram Cerberus for the first time, for a moment, I thought he was Drake, although Drake was much bigger and his coloring's different. But overall, he's very similar. Not just his appearance, but the air about him, too. His strength: the fact that his origins are unknown. So my conjecture—no, I had a hunch. That the same thing might happen again."

"The same thing...You mean the appearance of Chrome Disaster?"

"Yes. Of course, I knew that Haru had sealed the Armor away. But...it was like that back then, when Drake became the Disaster. The First had been subjugated, and everyone living in the Accelerated World believed without doubt that the terrifying berserker would never again appear there. And yet..."

"...The Armor appeared, and massive amounts of blood flowed once more..."

Akira nodded deeply at Kuroyukihime's hushed voice. "This is just a hypothesis, but if Wolfram Cerberus is playing the role of the one to equip the Armor like Drake did, then somewhere in the Accelerated World, there has to be the one trying to produce the armor. With that in mind, I've been in the Gallery as much as possible for Cerberus's duels this week. Unfortunately, however, the timing was bad, and I didn't get to see his duels yesterday and the day before with you, Haru."

“Y-you didn’t?” Haruyuki pulled his head back into himself.

His former tag-team partner smiled faintly. “I was set on finally seeing it today, but you didn’t show up. But it seems Cerberus was also waiting for you, and today he didn’t start a single duel himself, and then after a while, he disappeared from the matching list. So I thought maybe he was going to head toward Nega Nebulus territory himself. I couldn’t decide at first, but eventually, I took a train from Nakano to Suginami. I got off at Koenji, connected globally on a bench at the station, and just in case, I turned Battle Royale standby mode on...”

“So then you were pulled into the BR stage Cerberus initiated.”

“Yes. But naturally, I wasn’t going to participate in the duel. I was planning to just watch Cerberus and Haru duel and then go home, as long as nothing happened. But I never dreamed *she’d* jump into the stage, and then interfere with the duel on top of that...”

“...Quad Eyes Analyst...Argon Array, right?” Haruyuki asked.

Akira assented with an unusually strong nod. “For the sake of my original objective of gathering information, I should have stayed hidden and observed her, but...When I saw her attacking you and Ash Roller with total disregard, I got so angry I could hardly stand it, and I just butted in. I couldn’t even be much help to you for all that.”

“N-no, that’s not true at all!!” Haruyuki shouted forcefully, and he leaned forward toward the girl. “Argon Array’s laser attack had me totally pinned down. I was so frustrated I wanted to cry. I couldn’t even stand up. And then I saw you on the building, and I was so moved. My memory couldn’t have returned yet, but I just felt this strength surge up in me...It’s because you were there, Curren, that I was able to get up and fight again.” The words spilled out of Haruyuki as though from a dream, and a smile gentler than anything he’d seen on her face so far came across Akira’s

lips.

“...Silver Crow, you’ve become much, much stronger than I imagined. Seeing the player I guarded grown up into such a fine Burst Linker makes me happier than anything else. The flow of events is unexpected...but I really am glad that I could meet you again like this today...”

The two stared at each other quietly, and Kuroyukihime’s three-point throat clearing passed between them.

“Oh, Haruyuki, I’m really sorry I couldn’t help you when you were in that bind. At any rate, I was in the Gallery! And Akira, it sounds as though your reunion with me was an afterthought?”

Haruyuki naturally flinched and pulled back, but Akira shifted her gaze to Kuroyukihime and giggled, with a look on her face like that of an older sister looking at her spoiled baby sister. “Sach, you haven’t changed a bit from the old days.”

“A-are you saying that I haven’t grown?!”

“I meant it as a compliment, of course. The Legion Master I dedicated my sword to waited for me, without anything changing. There’s no way I wouldn’t be happy about that.” She closed her mouth for a second and recomposed her face, posture, and tone into something crisp and correct. “This is surely also the guidance of the endlessly circulating water. Sach—no, Black King, Black Lotus—I, Aqua Current, from this second on this day, would like to return to Nega Nebulus. Will you allow me to?”

Kuroyukihime blinked several times, clearly caught off guard by the sudden declaration. But soon enough, her jet-black eyes sparkled, and she stood up forcefully from the sofa. She walked around the glass table to stand before Akira and extended her right hand. When Akira took it and stood up, Kuroyukihime stared into the sepia-brown eyes at the same height as her own and murmured, “Of course. Of course I will...Welcome home,

Curren.”

“...Glad to be back, Lotus.”

And then the two of them simultaneously took another step forward and wrapped their arms tightly around each other.

Haruyuki didn't weep and sob like he had two months earlier when Kuroyukihime had embraced Fuko Kurasaki at the Shinjuku Southern Terrace, but he did indeed clearly feel their hearts touching, resonating, and spreading out to fill the room with waves of warm light.

June 27, 2047. Two years and ten months since the destruction of the former Legion. Following in the steps of the wind, Sky Raker, and fire, Ardor Maiden, another of the Four Elements, water, Aqua Current, had made it home to Nega Nebulus.



4

Two days later—Saturday, June 29, three PM.

Haruyuki was inside the animal hutch standing behind the second school building at Umesato Junior High, neatly scrubbing the water-covered floor with a deck brush. Normally, the floor was covered in sheets with a water-resistant coating, so at a glance, it wasn't dirty, but to maintain the health of the master of the hutch, he had decided to clean the floor once a week.

That master, aka the northern white-faced owl Hoo, was on the left perch tree in his usual position, turning his head around from time to time. It wasn't as though he was particularly monitoring Haruyuki's work; he was probably sensing the atmosphere filling up and rising from the entire school. Because the following day, Sunday, was finally the day of the Umesato school festival.

The brass band was in the middle of its final dress rehearsal onstage in the gym, and frenzied voices echoed from the team building the school festival gate in the front yard. Meanwhile, the calls of people practicing an original dance on the grounds on the other side of the second school building reached out to him faintly from the distance.

This was Haruyuki's second school festival, and he didn't hate the idea of it, as something he didn't get to have in elementary school. But for all that, he was taking part in a rather subdued group again this year—the class in charge of the exhibit with the stiff-ish theme of “Koenji Thirty Years Ago.” His class had finished its preparations early, about an hour earlier. All that was left was to simply upload the AR display files Haruyuki was in charge of to the local net the following morning and activate

them.

Chi Yuri's track-and-field team was doing a crepe booth, and Takumu's kendo team was presenting a costumed dance, so they were both still getting ready. They were supposed to be finished after four to make it in time for the Territories in the evening (naturally, not part of the school festival, but in the Accelerated World), but in the worst case, the Legion might have to defend Suginami without the two of them, so it could be down to only the remaining four members.

...No, not four. Five.

Two days before, on Thursday, they had welcomed a long-awaited new Legion member to Nega Nebulus, bringing their total membership up to seven.

Alongside this thought, something warm started to well up in Haruyuki's heart, but that quickly sank back down somewhere deep inside, because he remembered the duel after school the day before. Or rather, the duel that *hadn't* happened after school that day.

Haruyuki had no sooner finished feeding Hoo the previous day than he was flying out of school and heading for Nakano Area No. 2 by himself to duel Wolfram Cerberus. He was going to exchange blows to his heart's content with Cerberus this time for sure, in a normal duel with no interruptions, and call him out one more time. To say, *Come with me*. To say, *Be my comrade—my friend*.

But despite the fact that Cerberus had been dueling in Naka-2 every day, for some reason he had never shown up the day before, no matter how many hours Haruyuki waited. Instead, Haruyuki was caught by Kuroyukihime and Fuko, who'd come to check on him, and the two of them ended up staying over at the Arita house, which was, of course, fun, but when dawn came, this feeling of regret he could do nothing about came back to life. Or rather, it was more than regret—closer to unease. What if Cer-

berus never appeared again? Or what if, when he did show up, some kind of decisive change had visited him?

With these complicated thoughts in mind, he moved the deck brush diligently. *Sksh, sksh, sksh.*

UI> WHICH IS IT?

Cherry-pink text flowed across the ad hoc chat window open in his field of view.

When he lifted his head, a younger girl was leaning lightly against the door of the hutch, holding a deck brush in her right hand and smiling. On the chest of her white gym uniform, which she was wearing since it didn't matter if it got wet, was a school crest that was not Umesato's.

"Wh-which what?" Haruyuki stopped moving his hands and asked in reply, and Shinomiya Utai, at once a fourth grader at the affiliated Matsunogi Academy and the "super president" of the Umesato Animal Care Club, looked up at him as she sent the fingers of her left hand racing through space.

UI> ARITA, THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE IS CURRENTLY SOMEHOW HALF-HAPPY AND HALF-SAD...

The lines of text were displayed in the chat window at a speed faster than they could be said aloud.

Haruyuki thought about it for a second and then bobbed his head. "Yeah, maybe...I went to Nakano after we were done taking care of Hoo yesterday, but I didn't get to duel Cerberus. That's the reason for the sad—well, regretful face, I guess."

UI> IS THAT WHAT HAPPENED...?

The smile vanished from her face, so Haruyuki hurried to add, "But I mean, if he's in junior high, then he has to have a bunch of stuff happening in the real. Once it's July, semester finals start

and all..." He paused, damage inflicted on himself with those words.

Utai smiled broadly once again. UI> I'M SURE YOU'LL GET TO SEE HIM SOON. SO THEN WHAT'S THE REASON FOR THE HAPPY FACE?

"That...", he started to say, and then he clamped his mouth shut.

They were going to report the series of events that happened after school two days earlier—Cerberus and the sudden Battle Royale, the intrusion of Argon Array, and the reason for the happy face: the appearance and return to the Legion of Aqua Current—to all the members before the Territories that day. Even Fuko, who'd stayed at the Aritas' the previous night, still didn't know.

"...Um, that's a secret for a little longer."

Utai opened her eyes wide and then puffed out her cheeks defiantly. UI> EVEN FOR ME, THE SUPER PRESIDENT OF THE ANIMAL CARE CLUB?

"Th-that's just a title I-Izeki went and gave you." The instant he said this, a buzzer sounding in his brain notified him of his incorrect response.

UI> SACCHI REVISED—I MEAN, CORRECTED—THE CLUB REGISTER AND CHANGED MY ROLE TO "SCHOOL CULTURAL EXCHANGE STUDENT" AND "SUPER PRESIDENT." SO IT'S AN OFFICIAL JOB NOW!

"Wh-what?!" *She's gone and done something serious for fun again.*

With this thought, he opened the Animal Care Club page on the local net, and indeed, above President Haruyuki, the name of Super President Utai Shinomiya shone brilliantly. Glancing at Utai out of the corner of his eye as she thrust out the chest of her gym uniform proudly, he thought about it for a while before call-

ing out to the snow-faced owl on the perch, “Hey, Hoo! You have something you can’t even say to your boss, right?”

The bird of prey that reigned from the pinnacle of the Umesato Animal Care Club spread his wings in a fairly indifferent manner and flapped them two or three times. Interpreting that as an assent, Haruyuki turned back to Utai.

“See? Hoo’s saying that, too.”

UI> IT’S NOT FAIR TO USE HOO! After puffing up her cheeks 50 percent more than before, Utai broke into a soundless grin. Brandishing the brush in her right hand, she continued to type deftly with just her left hand. UI> NOW THEN, I’LL HAVE YOU EXPLAIN AFTER THE CLEANING IS FINISHED. SO LET’S FINISH THIS!

Once they had brushed and mopped the floor, cleaned the water bath, and spread out the sheets again, the clock had swung around to three thirty. Reina Izeki, who had given Utai the title of Super President, was absent from club work that day, since apparently, the situation was dire for the exhibit of class B. Even still, he should count himself lucky she came to apologize first; the other member of the club, a boy from class A called Hamajima, hadn’t shown his face once since the first day.

Thus, it was just the two of them who signed the club activities log and uploaded the file, completing the work for that day.

UI> I’M GOING TO GO AND CHANGE MY CLOTHES, SO PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT. Utai bowed neatly, bag in one hand. He felt bad that she was always having to use the washrooms on the first floor of the second school building as a changing room, but the only proper girls’ locker rooms were in the gym and the first school building, and both were pretty far from the rear courtyard.

“T-take your time.” After seeing Utai off, Haruyuki sat down on a bench under a tree and let out a sigh.

As of that day, it'd already been twenty days since he'd been appointed to the Animal Care Club. He had gotten used to cleaning the hutch and weighing the bird, and although he still couldn't feed Hoo himself yet, the club work had very much become part of his daily routine.

When he'd first seen the hutch, piled high with who knew how many years of rotten leaves, he was convinced there was no way to clean it up, and when he'd seen Hoo, he thought it a complete impossibility to take care of a large bird like that. And to begin with, Haruyuki had never harbored any intention of doing any kind of extracurricular activity; the sequence of events that led to him being selected as a club member had started with him unintentionally standing as a candidate through his own carelessness.

At school, he desperately held his breath, pulled into himself, and tried not to stand out, not to be noticed. That was supposedly his lone, absolute rule. Even after he met Kuroyukihime and she gave him the miraculous thought-acceleration program Brain Burst, he had assumed his self in the real world wouldn't change a bit—that it couldn't.

But in truth, it wasn't as though something had changed. He was still as afraid as ever of the eyes of students he didn't know very well, and just being called on in class was enough to make sweat pop up on his forehead. Even with the Animal Care Club, he couldn't deny that he was able to continue with it solely because the only other active member was another Burst Linker and fellow Legion member, Utai.

Yet, a few days earlier...when he had overexerted himself in the mock basketball tournament and collapsed, he'd been taken to the nurses' office. There, Kuroyukihime had stayed with him, going so far as to ditch her own class, and had said that in both the real world and in the Accelerated World, it was possible to overwrite a wall that appeared to be an absolute limit by drawing on the power of the image.

For Haruyuki, if he really dived deep, the “absolute limit” was his own self: small, fat, not good at sports or school, without the courage to fight back against the delinquents who bullied him. That negative self-image had locked him up in a small cage. Or that’s what Kuroyukihime would probably say.

But even if he had wanted to have a positive image of his real self, he couldn’t find any basis for it. So he had worked a little at cleaning the hutch or in a basketball game—that was something any other student could have done. That was nothing more than negative 100 becoming negative 95.

Ever since he had become a Burst Linker last fall, Haruyuki had had many encounters not only in the Accelerated World but in the real world as well. Super President Utai Shinomiya/Ardor Maiden was one of them, and then there were Fuko Kurasaki/Sky Raker, Rin Kusakabe/Ash Roller, Akira Himi/Aqua Current, and of course, Kuroyukihime/Black Lotus. They had held his hand, cheered him on, given him the push he needed not just for his duel avatar, but for the real-life Haruyuki, too. They had told him over and over and over that his existence had a unique value all on its own.

He hadn’t the slightest intention of doubting those words. He was going to fight with everything he had from now on, too, in order to live up to everyone’s expectations.

—But.

What if I stop being the Burst Linker Silver Crow? What if I lost all my memories of the Accelerated World, and I went back to being the original Haruyuki Arita with nothing?

If that happened, it’d be like them that time. Like them arguing in hushed, sharp voices, not knowing I was listening in the living room in the middle of the night with the lights turned off. Like Mom and Dad saying they don’t want me...

Abruptly, he heard the flapping of wings, and Haruyuki lifted his face. On the other side of the chicken wire, Hoo had spread his grayish-white wings all the way out and was staring at Haruyuki with round, copper-colored eyes.

With a body length of twenty centimeters, he was one of the smaller owl species, but when he spread his wings, he created quite the impressive silhouette. The shape of his wings was utterly unlike that of the crows and starlings often seen around town. His legs, built for capturing prey, were also solid. Haruyuki was once again reminded that this was a bird of prey, regardless of his small stature.

But on one of those legs was a horrible scar in the shape of a lightning bolt. It was the mark left from when his previous owner had abandoned Hoo, digging out the individual identification microchip there in order to escape punishment under the Reformed Animal Welfare Act. For whatever reason, the owner had thought Hoo had become a nuisance.

“...You were told you weren’t wanted, too, huh...?” Haruyuki murmured, and the white-faced owl slowly folded his wings and whirled his head around, almost as if to say, *So what?*

The abandoned Hoo had been cared for on the grounds of Matsunogi Academy by Utai, but with the blood loss from his wound, he had apparently been near death. Even after they saved his life, he lost his home with the elimination of the Animal Care Club, and if they hadn’t found him a place that would take him, he wouldn’t have been able to avoid being put down in the end. So the fact that Hoo was alive like this now was precisely because of that girl’s earnest efforts.

But there was nothing pitiable or miserable about the Hoo inside the hutch now. His form was, to the last feather, noble and beautiful. Of course, this was nothing more than Haruyuki’s feelings, but at the very least, Hoo didn’t care whether anyone needed him or not. He simply lived his own life in his own world.

“...You’re pretty cool, huh?” Haruyuki murmured and stood up from the bench before thrusting his own arms straight up and straightening his back.

The idea of seeking out the eyes or words of others as the basis for a positive image of yourself was in and of itself a mistake. Your only choice was to find that image inside yourself—even if it was small like a grain of sand—and build it up bit by bit. Fortunately, he had a pile of difficult challenges to tackle every day. He had to make sure that the class exhibit for the school festival the next day actually worked properly, and he had to make it through the exams that would attack him after that. And then there were that week’s Territories in another fifteen minutes. As he cleared these hurdles one after another, he should definitely find something on the other side.

Right, I mean, that’s what I’ve been doing so far.

He heard the sound of light feet behind him and turned around to meet the eyes of Utai, who had changed into her white dress-style uniform. The girl, four years younger than he was, looked directly at his face with eyes filled with a deep wisdom and then grinned as if she’d found something there.

UI> THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP CLEANING. LET’S FIGHT HARD IN THE TERRITORIES, TOO!

The characters spelled out were simple, but he felt sure she’d said it because she sensed his unending doubt and fear.

Nodding, Haruyuki also put some strength into his reply. “Yeah! Let’s do this!”

The Territories—team battles where Legion fought Legion for the right to control an area—were held every Saturday at four PM.

The attacking side formed and registered an attack team in advance through the BB console and then moved to the target area

—in the real world—and went on standby. Once four o’clock rolled around, the leader would accelerate and open the normal duel matching list, where the name of the ruling Legion would appear at the top. They would then select that name and challenge them to a duel.

The defending side also registered the defense team in advance and went on standby within the territory area. But the advantage for the ruling Legion was that they could come out in defense even if their real self was in a different territory, as long as it was an adjacent territory. In other words, if they were on standby at Umesato Junior High in Suginami Area No. 2, it was possible to defend No. 1 to the north and No. 3 to the west.

Therefore, a connection to the global net was a must. In school, only the machines that lived in the student council office were allowed to connect globally, and then just after school, but Kuroyukihime had secretly gone around the former restriction. She had given Haruyuki and the other members of Nega Nebulus access privileges for the student council machines and enabled a global connection by using a special device as a stepping-stone in the in-school local net.

Thus, Haruyuki and Utai sat down next to each other on the bench by the animal hutch to take part in the Territories from there. One battle took the same thirty-minute maximum as a normal duel—1.8 seconds in real time—but their standby time got longer when there were many teams attacking. Haruyuki handed Utai a juice box he’d brought, and she pulled a small paper bag of fried *karinto* cookies out of her shoulder bag and offered them to him.

“Th-thanks.” Haruyuki accepted the small bag with gratitude, and the instant he saw the words *Goshiki Karinto* printed on it, a feeling of joy welled up in his heart again, and he naturally screwed his face up.

UI> DO YOU LIKE KARINTO THAT MUCH? Utai typed with a curious

look on her face.

“Y-yeah.” He hurriedly bobbed his head up and down. “They’re my favorite. Thanks, Shinomiya.”

It was true that he loved them, but the reason for his smile was because he was reminded of a Burst Linker whose name sounded just a bit like the word *karinto*. But he had gone to the trouble of keeping it secret up to now, so he couldn’t exactly start blabbing at this point. He recomposed himself and checked the clock on his virtual desktop—3:55 PM.

“Okay, the meeting’s gonna start soon, so let’s connect to the student council server,” Haruyuki said, moving his finger at the same time as Utai.

When he tapped an icon that was placed slightly deep within his 3-D field of view, individual authentication was carried out, and then an ADD NETWORK dialogue window was displayed. Hereby, Haruyuki and Utai were connected to the closed net that Kuroyukihime had built inside the student council machines for Territory prep, in addition to the Umesato local net.

They waited like this, and when the clock turned to 3:57, the familiar sound of acceleration filled his ears, while the letters announcing the start of a duel burned brightly in his field of view. But, of course, this was not the actual Territories. They were using a normal duel via the Legion Master to have a strategy meeting prior to battle.

When Haruyuki’s duel avatar Silver Crow stepped down onto the white earth of the Moonlight stage, a shrine maiden clad in scarlet and unbleached cloth descended in a place slightly removed. This was Ardor Maiden, controlled by Utai.

Although the two of them were sitting on the same bench in the real world, Maiden was a spectator, so their initial appearance locations were automatically separated.

As a general rule, spectators could not come within ten meters of duelers, but parents and children, or members of the same Legion, could circumvent that rule. While Haruyuki waited for Utai to walk over to him, he destroyed a couple of the thin conifers reaching up into the sky like lances and charged his special-attack gauge a little. The meeting would take place on the grounds, but walking from the rear courtyard would have been slightly annoying.

The shrine maiden avatar stopped before the extremely small temple that had been the animal hutch in the real world and peered inside. “So Hoo isn’t over here, after all,” she said.

“W-well, Brain Burst only recreates terrain, so...,” Haruyuki replied.

Turning back to him, Maiden’s red eye lenses flashed. “Once, an elephant at a zoo in the real world turned into this super huge mammoth in the Primeval Forest stage...I heard a rumor.”

“Whaaaat?! I wanna see that. Okay, how about we test it out at the Ueno Zoo?”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“D-da—?! N-no, that’s, I mean, it’s not that—I mean, from a purely strategic Burst Linker point of view...” Haruyuki grew flustered, and Maiden giggled happily. The real-world Utai was all silent smiles, so he could only hear her laughing on this side. And even then, it was fairly rare.

Unconsciously, Haruyuki had started to laugh with her when they heard the heavy sound of destruction from somewhere off in the distance. At the same time, Black Lotus’s special-attack gauge, displayed in the upper right of his field of view, suddenly increased—Kuroyukihime had destroyed some kind of massive object. The reason was, of course, that Haruyuki was late to join them.

He flinched, pulling back into himself, and then hurriedly spread the wings on his back. “O-okay, I’ll head to the grounds first!”

It would have been good if he could have carried Utai as he flew, but unfortunately, he couldn’t move her, since she was a member of the Gallery. Waving, he left Utai in the rear courtyard and took off at an acute angle.

In a single breath, he had flown over the second school building, the inner courtyard, and the first school building. A slender silhouette came into view in the center of the grounds, illuminated by the pale moonlight. One of the two large spotlights that should have been there had been severed at the base and was gone. A shiver ran up his spine once more before he landed and bowed deeply.

“I-I’m very sorry I’m late!”

“No, no need to apologize. I’m happy the members of the Legion get along with one another.” It was clear that the voice of the jet-black duel avatar responding thusly, the Black King, Black Lotus, was extremely sour. She couldn’t have heard the conversation about dates and all that, but at times like this, the ESP of Kuroyukihime did not follow the rules of the Accelerated World.

Fortunately, as he struggled with whether to try out further excuses, he heard the sound of the other avatars appearing around them. Through the Automatic Follow function, Ardor Maiden, Cyan Pile, and Lime Bell had been teleported there.

“Hello Sacchi, Chiyuri, Mayuzumi.” Utai bowed her head.

Chiyuri and Takumu also made their greetings before they clasped their hands together in front of their faces.

“Kuroyuki, Ui—I’m sorry!”

“Please excuse us, Master. Chii and I still aren’t finished with festival preparations.”

Haruyuki had expected this, but when he heard them, he abruptly shouted, “Wh-what?! So then, Chiyutaku, you’re not doing the Territories?!”

“I *told* you to stop with the combined or whatever name thing!” Lime Bell said, putting her hands on her hips. “I can’t help it. Right now, I’m testing out crepes in the booth. The time for this meeting’s set, so I could make arrangements to accelerate, but I don’t know when the Territories will start, so...”

“I’m in the middle of dance practice,” Cyan Pile added, scratching his head with the pile driver of his right hand. “And it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to get away for a while. Haru, can you just try and push through somehow without us today?”

“W-well, of course, I’m going to try...,” he replied, when there was another *vumm* of appearance to his left.

Teleporting in was an F-type avatar in a silver wheelchair. Her slender body was wrapped in a white dress, and long hair that shone bluish-silver hung down from beneath her equally white, wide-brimmed hat. This was their Legion Submaster, Sky Raker—Fuko Kurasaki.

Now that Raker had gotten back her legs, which she had been missing for some time, in the Hermes’ Cord race, there was no longer any need for her to use the wheelchair Enhanced Armament. But in fact, to her, the wheelchair was not a handicap, but a powerful weapon that increased her mobility several times over. She couldn’t show off its true power unless the earth of the stage was flat and hard, but of course, she could just stand up when it wasn’t.

Thus, Fuko normally showed up for the Territories in her wheelchair, and now, she approached as if gliding across the

smooth tiles laid out on the earth of the Moonlight stage. She bowed lightly before saying with a smile, “It’s all right. If Chi-ko and Mayuzumi are out today, that does mean we’ll be defending with two teams of two this week, but I’ll allow you to freely choose your partner, Corvus.”

“Oh, th-thank— Wait, whaaaaat?!” After unthinkingly bringing a hand to the back of his head and starting to thank her, he reeled backward anew. What Fuko was saying, basically, was that he had to choose her, Utai, or Kuroyukihime to team up with. Of course, all three of them were certifiably great in battle, but in this situation, it didn’t look like he’d be allowed to reply, “Anyone’s okay.”

Haruyuki looked in turn at the grinning face of Sky Raker, the somehow serious or rather desperate air of Ardor Maiden (the reason was likely that she would end up tag-teaming with Fuko depending on Haruyuki’s choice), and the cold light shining in the eyes of Black Lotus...and then he finally realized it:

Even without Takumu and Chiyuri, the number of people on the defense team was not four, but five. Because starting that day, Nega Nebulus had a new member—or rather, a returning member. And that was precisely the reason for the happiness that Haruyuki was keeping secret from Ardor Maiden. Exhaling slowly, Haruyuki turned to Lotus and gave a nod.

Kuroyukihime released her grumpy mood and let the air of a faint smile bleed out. She loosely raised the sword of her right arm and, after first indicating the enormous full moon shining in the middle of the night sky, slowly moved the tip of her sword upward. It pointed toward the first school building, indicating a point on the roof. In that place where the Legion members now focused their gazes, at some point, a seventh person had quietly come to stand. A duel avatar of flowing water that caught the pale moonlight and shone coolly.

“What...?!” Fuko gasped.

“Ah...ah!” Utai let out a pinched shout. Chiyuri and Takumu were also frozen in place, looks of surprise on their faces. And then, under his goggles, a broad smile spread across Haruyuki’s face.

As the six of them stared wordlessly, the avatar dropped down to the ground along the wall of the school building, and the babbling of water reached their ears; the fine droplets dancing in the air reflected the light of the moon and glittered silver. Fuko and Utai took a few steps forward as if pulled in, and the flowing-water avatar came to a stop before them.

The silence continued for a while before a murmur came riding on the sound of her water.

“...I’m home, Raker, Maiden.”

Even hearing that voice, Fuko and Utai didn’t react right away. Or rather, they couldn’t. Some seconds passed before they squeezed out faintly.

“Is that you...Curren...?”

“Ren...is it you?”

The water of the Four Elements, Aqua Current, returned a definite nod to both questions. Then she reached out, and the rings of water connected to the backs of her hands spread out to both sides, drawing a large heart in the air. Fuko and Utai leapt forward at the same time and, spreading their arms similarly wide, wrapped themselves around Current’s—Akira’s—body.

As Haruyuki watched the three hugging each other tightly with a warm feeling in his heart, Chiyuri asked softly from beside him, “Hey, Haru...Was this person maybe one of our senior members way back when...?”

“Yeah. That’s Aqua Current. She’s finally come back to Nega

Nebulus.”

“Wait, Haru, you knew? You knew and you kept it a secret?!” She shoved him in the side with the edge of her Enhanced Armament Choir Chime, and he hurried to make his excuses:

“E-even if I did know, I only met Curren two days ago! And making it a surprise was more fun. I mean, we get to watch this reunion.”

“That’s no reason to keep it from us! Right, Taku—? ...Huh? What’s wrong, Taku?”

Haruyuki looked back together with Chiyuri and saw Cyan Pile standing there with his arms crossed, twisting his head from side to side for some reason.

“...Aqua Current...one of the Four Elements...I’m pretty sure we were told that, but she’s...the bodyguard, the One...Why have I heard this name before, and that...?”

“Wh-whoa, you okay, Taku? ...Oh! R-right. Your memory, too!” Haruyuki took his eyes off Takumu—who was so deep in thought that steam practically threatened to come out of the slits in his face mask—and shouted at Akira, still immersed in her emotional reunion, “Uh, um! I’m sorry to disturb you in the middle of something, Curren! P-please do that, that Memory Free thing for Taku, too!!”

On the verge of losing all his points the previous fall, Haruyuki had fought tag-team matches with Akira in the Jimbocho area and averted the crisis. But after that, he had been forced to forget the meeting with Aqua Current through the amazing Incarnate technique Memory Leak, which sealed away memories, and he hadn’t been able to remember a thing about it until she’d released the seal two days before. And apparently, she’d performed the same technique on Takumu, who had gone with him to Jimbocho.

After they switched the battlefield to Battle Royale mode, Takumu had his memory returned, as Haruyuki had. He shook his head back and forth several times before finally nodding as if satisfied. “I see...I finally understand how you were never cracked in the real despite the fact that you’ve been in the high-risk job of the Bodyguard for such a long time.”

Akira shrugged lightly. “As a guarantee of security, just a photo in the real’s usually enough. The memories I’ve sealed so far have just been those of a few Burst Linkers who contacted me with malicious intent right from the start and”—she closed her mouth again and then added with a smile—“you new Nega Nebulus members.”

“Honestly, leveling up right away when you’ve just reached three hundred points—that is so like you, Haru,” Chiyuri said, shaking her pointed hat from side to side, and then turned her face to Akira and offered a straight question. “But, Curren, I mean, sealing memories...Even for an Incarnate technique, that is a super-amazing effect. How on earth did you put it together?”

“From my perspective, Bell, your special attack is way more amazing. As for the logic of my Incarnate technique, I’ll explain in detail once the duel’s over, so I’ll just summarize for now. I think everyone here knows that the Brain Burst program itself has the power to interfere with Burst Linker memories.”

At this, Haruyuki let slip an unconscious “Oh!” The fact that he hadn’t connected this until that very moment was pathetic, but it was true that when Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled itself from the Neurolinkers of players who had lost all their points, it also ripped up memories of the Accelerated World, right from the root. Haruyuki had even seen an actual example of this in April of that year.

Akira looked around at everyone before continuing. “My Incarnate technique Memory Leak activates that power in a very limited way and blocks memories related to me. We can talk

about the detailed mechanics of it later, when we have more time.”

“Honestly, way to throw cold water on the love, Curren. Even us Elements didn’t know you had a power like that,” Fuko remarked.

“Of course I bring the cold water,” the avatar wrapped entirely in flowing water replied smoothly.

Everyone laughed at this, and then Kuroyukihime clanked the long swords of her hands together.

“We have much more to talk about, but at any rate, Nega Nebulus has welcomed a new member. Bell, Pile, Crow, I’m sure you’ll have many opportunities from now on to fight alongside Current. Make use of your own particular abilities and come up with effective combinations. With that said, since Bell and Pile can’t take part in the Territories today, that leaves five of us to defend. As for the team-ups, sorry, but I’ll be deciding that.”

Haruyuki waited slightly nervously for what she would say next. In the flowing tones befitting the master, Kuroyukihime briskly gave instructions for the areas they would all be responsible for.

“The south side, Suginami Areas Two and Three, will be Raker and myself. And Maiden, Current, and Crow will be placed in Area One in the north. I’m counting on you all. Getting our territory stolen right before the Tokyo Midtown Tower operation would be about as exciting as a Sewer stage.”

5

As a general rule, the amount of people taking part in the Territories was set so that the number on the defending team and the number on the attacking team matched. In other words, if there were three on the defending side, then even if the attacking side was a team of five people, two of them would be automatically removed, and only the three with the highest levels would dive into the battlefield.

The exception to this rule was when there was just one or two people on the defending side. The minimum for the attacking side was three, so even if there were two or fewer defenders, they would have to fight an enemy of three.

So for Territory Battles among the Great Legions with member Burst Linkers numbering in the dozens or more, the element of reading the number of people on the opposing team came into play. If a large team of ten people was intercepted by a team of three, that would waste the battle potential of seven of the enemy's team, and in the event that defending the entire territory was impossible, there was a chance to take a worthwhile loss by putting just one person in an area where the greatest number of the enemy was expected to attack and throwing the fight.

However, with the current state of affairs in Suginami, that level of strategic operation wasn't necessary. Since everyone knew that the second Nega Nebulus was a small Legion with fewer than ten people, those coming to attack didn't put together teams of more than three. About the only element to read in advance was whether the attacking side would avoid the area where Black Lotus was. The reason was simple: They couldn't win against her.

Put another way, in areas without the Black King, the fight would be good. Sarcastic enemies would even shout out, “All right! Hit the jackpot!” when they got an area without Lotus but with Crow, so Haruyuki absolutely couldn’t let his guard down whether he was on Kuroyukihime’s team or not.

Thus, the instant the first duel of the day started mere seconds after four o’clock and he descended into the battlefield of Suginami Area No. 1, Haruyuki shouted in high spirits, “All right! Let’s work hard and defend this place, Mei, Curren!!” But the next moment, he dropped his shoulders and groaned, “U-ugh... this stage...”

There was nothing that particularly stood out in the terrain as he looked around. The roads were covered in a gray asphalt that strongly resembled that of the real world, and the buildings were all made of a similarly gray concrete. About the only thing that stood out were the large manholes dotting the road. But these were precisely the biggest feature of the Sewer Stage.

“...’Cos Lo went and said that, it actually happened...” Ardor Maiden’s voice was also lifeless.

Next to her, for Aqua Current, in what was her first Territory as a member of the new Nega Nebulus and thus something to be memorialized, the pace of the water flowing around her body dulled just the slightest bit. It was no wonder their morale plummeted; the Sewer stage was the unshakable unfavorite of all the water-type stages.

But Aqua Current, the oldest of the three and with the longest history as a Burst Linker, naturally looked at the situation coolly. “It’ll be just as hard for the enemy team. If it’s a battle of willpower, then there’s no way we can lose.”

“Y-you’re right. I mean, a sewer’s just a dark, stinky, wet pipe!”

“...Your wording aside, Crow, that spirit’s good. So then I’ll ask

you to take the lead in this Territory Battle. Thanks.”

“Okay, leave everything to— Wh-what?!” Haruyuki recoiled belatedly, but even Maiden was bobbing her head up and down.

“Once the battle starts, Ren and I will move on your instructions, C. I’m looking forward to a nice strategy!”

“...Y-yesh...I’ll do my best...” Haruyuki could hardly tell them no at this stage, so he nodded firmly and then checked the enemy team formation displayed in the upper right of his field of view.

There were three of them, naturally. From the top, they were the level-five Blaze Heart, the also-level-five Ochre Prison, and the level-four Peach Parasol. None of the names were unfamiliar. In fact, he had even duelled them several times. But the instant Haruyuki saw those three avatar names together, he let out a small cry.

“Huh...? Why...?!”

“What’s the matter?” Utai cocked her head curiously, seeing Haruyuki’s reaction.

“The reason Crow is surprised”—it was Akira who explained smoothly—“is that all three of them belong to the Red Legion, Prominence.”

“Th-that’s right. Promi and us, we have an unlimited cease-fire right now; we promised not to attack one another in the Territories. So then why all of a sudden...Niko—I mean, the Red King—didn’t say anything to us...” After babbling this far, Haruyuki lit upon a single possibility and clenched his hands into tight fists.

The cease-fire pact between Prominence and Nega Nebulus, unlike the eternal mutual nonaggression treaty among the six Great Legions, prescribed no punishment whatsoever; it was, in other words, a gentlemen’s agreement. So it was possible for

them to come and attack in the Territories if some “impetus” caused by something surpassed the “rationality” of keeping the agreement. And given the current situation, of the handful of reasons he could think of, the most likely was—

“I-impossible...Even members of Promi are infected with the ISS kits...” The instant Haruyuki groaned, a note of tension raced across the faces of Akira and Utai. He had said it was impossible, but ten days earlier, members of another of the six Great Legions, Great Wall, had been infected. And Nerima area, Prominence’s territory, was not that far from Adachi area, one of the three places within the city known to be a source of ISS kit occurrence.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “So far, there hasn’t been anyone infected with the ISS kit taking part in the Territories,” he said quickly. “But it was only a matter of time. If all three of the enemy are equipped with kits, then they won’t hesitate to randomly shoot off the two Incarnate attacks—the long-distance Dark Shot and the close-range Dark Blow. Either of them has enough power to instantly kill if you’re hit without any guard. And”—he glanced toward the north of the stage—“if the enemy are kit users, it’s possible they won’t come through the sewers, but just charge us in a straight line aboveground.”

Normally, players couldn’t move freely aboveground in a Sewer stage because there were high, solid concrete walls blocking the way all over. They were movement restrictions to force players to use the sewers whether they liked it or not, but these restrictions had no meaning for anyone with an ISS kit. The two Incarnate techniques could easily gouge a hole in the thickest of walls.

The three members of the defending team were silent for a moment as they looked to the north of Suginami Area No. 1. In the Territories, regardless of the location of your real-world body, the attacking team and the defending team were always placed east-west or north-south. Haruyuki and his team had appeared on the southern edge of Kanpachi Ring Road No. 8 that cut

through the area from north to south, so the enemy team would be coming at them from the northern end of this road.

In any other stage, they'd have been able to see fairly far down the street, but the Sewer stage wouldn't allow that. A concrete wall, stained black by the rain, cut across the road just a dozen or so meters ahead of them. To go beyond it, they would have to use an ability that allowed them to climb vertical walls, go through the sewers underground, or fly over it.

“...I'm going to go investigate from abo—”

Haruyuki swallowed his words mid-sentence. In order to fly, he needed to charge his special-attack gauge, but in a very considered design touch, you could barely charge your gauge when you broke terrain objects aboveground in a Sewer stage. In exchange, there were plenty of mysterious oil drums in the tunnels underground that would make your gauge leap up if you smashed just one. It was, after all, a stage designed in every detail to make players give up and go underground.

Even so, if you tried to forcefully charge your gauge aboveground, the only way was to hit your allies or to be hit by them. But for victory in the Territories, in the event that the same number of people were still alive, the match would be decided by the total remaining in their health gauges, so they had to avoid needless damage to whatever extent possible.

Silver Crow's greatest ability, flight, was suddenly locked away, and Haruyuki slumped down.

“The intensity of your highs and lows hasn't changed at all,” Akira said in a voice that contained the slightest of smiles. “It's okay; I'll investigate.”

“Uh...um, how...?”

Without responding, Aqua Current walked over to the nearest

manhole and kicked at the edge of the rusted cover from directly above. *Kwaaan!* A metallic sound rang out, and the round cover bounced up and rolled onto the street. The hole that appeared was probably a meter or so in diameter. When Haruyuki listened closely, he could hear the heavy burbling of water flowing.

Aqua Current held her right hand above the hole and turned her fingers downward. When she did, two or three liters of the water racing around her body poured down and disappeared into the manhole.

“Uh, um, just what...?” Not comprehending, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. As a phenomenon, it looked like Current was simply throwing part of her valuable flowing-water armor into the sewer. The amount was about 10 percent, but the membrane of water covering her body was obviously thinner.

“Just leave it to Ren,” Utai calmly offered, beside him.

The silent Current lifted her face. “The enemy team is approaching through the sewers,” she announced matter-of-factly. “All three are moving together in a group. They’ll reach the center of the stage in a few minutes.”

“What?! H-how do you know that?!”

“The ability Hydro Auditory. Everything in the liquid my water is mixed in with is in my ears. I’ll tell you the rest as we move,” Current stated smoothly, and then she threw herself without hesitation into the manhole at her feet. Rather than using the ladder, she simply slid down the wall inside and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“So...w-we really will have to fight down there...”

“But this isn’t a bad development. If they’re moving properly underground without smashing the walls aboveground with Incarnate techniques, the possibility that they’re parasitized by ISS

kits is lower. And in the middle of a Territories stage...”

At Utai’s words, Haruyuki steeled himself and nodded. “That’s where the strongest base is. It’ll be annoying if they occupy it first...Okay, Mei! Let’s get moving, too.” He stretched out his right arm and lifted up Ardor Maiden’s petite form before taking a few steps forward and jumping into the manhole.

Although it was the first time he’d had a Territory Battle in this stage, that didn’t mean he had no experience with the Sewer stage itself. He had memorized the depth of the manholes and the internal structure. They were in free fall for about ten meters in the pitch-black, vertical hole, and then when they came out into a wide, gloomy space, he spread the wings on his back and braked. Silver Crow glided, carving out a spiral, and landed in the water with a splash next to Aqua Current, who had preceded them.

They were in an enormous underground tunnel with a semi-circle cross section like a *kamaboko* fish cake; it was probably six or seven meters in diameter. The floor and walls were the same concrete as the world aboveground, but they were covered entirely with a mysterious mucus—maybe mold, maybe moss—and the metal pipes of various sizes were cruelly rusted. For lighting, there were only the old-style fluorescent tube lights attached to the ceiling, and in the darkness where the light didn’t reach, small, unidentifiable creatures darted about.

A thin layer of water was flowing along the level floor, but it was actually a disgusting, muddied gray color, and just being sunk into it up to the ankles was extremely damaging mentally. If the day came when you tripped and fell into it face-first, you would inevitably faint in agony—or Haruyuki had experienced as much.

You will absolutely not fall today! Resolving himself, Haruyuki asked Maiden, his right arm still wrapped around her, “Um, Mei, can I put you down...maybe?”

“...If I said no, would you hold me the whole time?”

“Huh? W-well, until we encounter the enemy...”

“That’s a good idea.” The words had no sooner come from his left than Akira was also leaning into him, so Haruyuki reflexively lifted her with his left arm. But no matter how small the F-type avatars might have been, lifting two of them at the same time did put a certain load on him.

“Uh, uh, if I run like this, there’s a fairly good chance that I’ll trip and splash in face-first...”

“It’s okay. Smash that.”

When he looked in the direction of Current’s pointing finger, he did indeed see a cylindrical silhouette enshrined there, almost lost in the darkness. The Sewer stage bonus item: the oil drum. He approached it carefully so that he wouldn’t trip, and when he pulverized it with a single kick, a mysterious luminescent gas wafted out and illuminated their surroundings for a few moments. Bathed in this, the three avatars watched their special-attack gauges jump to nearly half-full.

“All right. Now I can fly to the center of the stage carrying both of you!”

“Please. My Hydro Auditory’s about to run out. I expect the enemy team will reach the center...in another minute and thirty seconds.”

“That’s plenty of time!” Haruyuki shouted as he deployed the metal wings on his back. It took mental energy to fly in a confined space, but if they could trace the enemy’s position, he didn’t need to be careful of surprise attacks, so he could go pretty fast. He lightly vibrated his wings, and once his feet were a couple dozen centimeters about the muddy water, Haruyuki started flying parallel. The straight part of the tunnel ended in the blink of an eye,

and a bifurcation to either side appeared ahead of them.

“Right,” Akira murmured in his ear before he could slacken his speed.

“Roger!” He inclined his body and went into a high-speed, right-angle turn, his specialty. The tip of his wing dipped in and out of the water surface, grazing it, and columns of water rose up behind them, one after another.

“It’s like a movie!” Utai said from his right arm, voice tinged with just the slightest bit of excitement.

Hearing this, Haruyuki wanted to go even faster, but it wouldn’t serve their purpose for him to come into contact with a wall because he was going too fast and dump all three of them into the sludge. *Hurry carefully*, he told himself.

He continued turning right and left, following Akira’s directions, and when they had flown for less than a minute, he could see a bright light up ahead. The blue color of it, closely resembling that of the special-attack gauge, was not a fluorescent light, but the light effect emitted by the base.

“That’s the center,” Akira noted. “The enemy team will be here in a few more seconds.”

“We’re going in!” he shouted as he spread out both wings wide and applied the brakes. Dropping speed, they flew out of the tunnel and into a round, underground space.

Sewer tunnels like the one they had come through met from all directions here, forming a gray lake in the center. The space was fifty meters across and probably thirty meters high, up to the ceiling of the dome. In the middle of the lake was a small concrete island, and on this floated a metal ring shining with blue light. Rotating slowly, emitting a strange vibration, this ring was the “foothold” specific to a Territories stage. Inside the ring, a

player's special-attack gauge was automatically charged, so the basic strategy of the Territories was to occupy the foothold somehow, defend it if you did manage to occupy it, or attack if it was occupied.

The foothold in the center of the stage was known as the “stronghold,” a charging ring larger than any of the other footholds. If they were small, three avatars could charge at the same time—although the recovery speed would slow down a bit—so whether this ring could be taken was often directly connected to victory or loss. Thus, Haruyuki started to fly to the small island in the center of the lake to occupy the still-deserted stronghold. But.

“Dodge!” At the same time as Akira's sharp voice rang out, something flew in from the tunnel on the opposite side at high speed. Oval and straight line and arc formed of bright red flames—it was an eighth note.

“Whoa!” Crying out, he turned sharply to the right and dropped down. The sparks, scattering from the flaming musical note, bounced off Silver Crow's armor in several places, but the heat resistance of his metal color proved a boon, and there was no damage.

The note carved out a loosely curving trajectory and flew off behind them. When it hit the concrete wall, it split into four thirty-second notes before forming an enormous vortex of flame.

Catching this on the edge of his field of view, Haruyuki fully braked on the verge of landing in the water. Unable to reach the foothold, he descended into the lake about twenty meters ahead of it. His feet were once more swallowed up by the muddy water, but in this situation, he obviously couldn't waste his time with feelings of visceral disgust. Akira and Utai jumped down from Haruyuki's arms and spread out to either side of him.

“...That technique just now, I'm pretty sure it was, um...”

The answer Haruyuki was trying to dig out of his memory came from the small duel avatar who leapt forcefully out of the tunnel he was facing. “So you dodge my Searing Note with no damage! You’re a real piece of work!” Paying no mind to the filth at her feet, the avatar ran splashing forward and stopped in a position where she created an isosceles triangle with Haruyuki and his friends and the floating island of the foothold as the triangle’s feet. She spun around twice there before striking a pose with her left hand on her side and her right thrust up into the air.

Her entire body was colored a fairly vivid, long-distance red. Of course, she wasn’t as saturated as the Red King, Scarlet Rain, but in the gloom of the underground space, the orange-scarlet stood out sharply. The armor of her upper body was in the shape of a blazer with a necktie, while that of her lower body was a miniskirt, and her head, with two long pigtails dangling down, was equipped with large ribbons on either side.

Haruyuki had seen this avatar, somehow reminiscent of an ancient cyber idol, before, albeit only two or three times in the Nerima area duel Galleries. “...Blaze Heart...”

Haruyuki’s voice as he uttered her name was a little hoarse, reflecting the anxiety and tension in his body.

Now that he was facing her directly, there was no longer any room for doubt. She was definitely a member of the Red Legion, Prominence. So then the problem was whether this battle was of her own volition or not.

Haruyuki took a step or two forward as he stared at Blaze’s body, still in her trademark pose, as if to devour it. The chest armor patterned after a blazer was split to either side, exposing the naked body of the avatar within. If she were parasitized with an ISS kit, it would have been right there. He concentrated, squinting hard to seek out the jet-black semisphere he had witnessed any number of times.

Perhaps sensing his gaze beyond Crow's mirrored goggles, Blaze Heart slapped both hands over her chest and shouted, "What're you staring at?! Sorry for being hella flat-chested!"

"Huh?! N-no, that's, I wasn't—"

"Whaaaat?! So then, you some kind of perv who likes wash-boards?! Now that you mention it, your comrades've got nothing going on upstairs, either!!"

At this from Blaze, he just barely managed to suppress the unconscious urge to look at Maiden and Current's chests. Haruyuki mustered up all his willpower and fixed his eyes firmly in front. "N-no, that's not it. It's not that I like flat chests or whatever!"

"That's right!" Utai's crisp voice followed in declaration. "Crow doesn't like breasts; he likes legs!!"

"Right, that's exactly— N-no, no, no!!"

"Hmm, that so? I'll make a note of it," Akira mentioned to his left, and Haruyuki wanted to run away.

But fortunately, before he could put that plan into action, Utai murmured at a volume that their opponent could not hear, "From Blaze's behavior, she doesn't seem to have been parasitized by the kit. I can't confirm a kit visually, either."

"Y-yeah...you're right. But then the problem is..." When Haruyuki had gotten that far, Blaze's two comrades chased in after her, sending water droplets flying everywhere, and came to a stop.

On the right was a yellowish-brown M-type avatar equipped with enormous claws on each sturdy arm. And on the left was a pale peach-colored F-type carrying a parasol-shaped Enhanced Armament as tall as she was. Ochre Prison and Peach Parasol—both Burst Linkers were also members of Prominence.

Haruyuki diligently but as casually as possible looked over their chest armor, but he couldn't see ISS kits on either one of them. When Blaze Heart brought her arms back down from in front of her body, he gave voice to the question swirling around in his heart.

“...You're all in Prominence, right? So why?! Us and Promi, we have an unlimited cease-fire. Or is this the will of the Red King—”

“It's not Rain!” The idol-type avatar in the scarlet blazer didn't let Haruyuki finish. “We're the ones who decided to attack!” Her high-pitched cry was clearly tinged with anger. Peach Parasol also raised her voice with “That's right! Exactly!” and Ochre Prison opened and closed the claws of both hands, making a rasping sound.



Apparently, something had happened that Heart and her comrades could not stomach—to the point where they would break the truce prescribed by the Red King—sending them here to challenge Suginami in the Territories that day. But Haruyuki had absolutely no clue as to the details of that “something.”

When it came to incidents involving Nega Nebulus and Prominence, there was basically only the Fifth Chrome Disaster at the beginning of the year. But at that time, the Master, aka Niko, had set up some social engineering centered on Haruyuki, and none of the other Legion members had made an appearance. When the incident with Dusk Taker had happened in April, Niko and her deputy Pard had helped Haruyuki and Takumu, and they had maintained friendly relations ever since—or rather, the two of them were simply precious friends. So Haruyuki had a feeling of closeness to the Red Legion itself, and even if their opportunities for exchange were few, he had absolutely no memory of ever taking action hostile to its members. So he couldn’t even imagine what had so enraged Blaze Heart and her comrades.

He glanced to either side, and both Utai and Akira lightly shook their heads. If they didn’t know what was going on either, the only thing to do was simply ask directly. “Um, what’s the reason for this? Did we do something to Pro—?”

“Of coooooourse you did!!” Blaze Heart screamed, her round and cute eye lenses shining a blue reminiscent of high-temperature flames. “You’re not going to tell me you forgot about yesterday! I mean, after you tried to get the Red King, Scarlet Rain, stuck in an EK with a super-huge Legend-class Enemy when she was leading the hunt! There were twenty or more of us in Promi out hunting Enemies in the Tooooooshima area of the Unlimited Neutral Field!”

“Wha— Wha—?!” Haruyuki threw his head back and then fiercely shook it, waving his hands from side to side as well. “W-we didn’t! We wouldn’t do that!”

Next to Heart, Peach Parasol's eyes shone sharply. "That's a bold-faced lie! Me and Heart and Och, we all tooootally saw it!" she cried, holding the umbrella-type Enhanced Armament in both hands and spinning it at high speed. Then the parasol stopped spinning and was turned forcefully toward Haruyuki as she set her sights on him with the gun muzzle in the tip. "It's true you guys weren't there, but...instead, she was riding on the back of a Legend class! Your Master! The Black King, Black Lotus!" Her voice, burning with anger, shot through Haruyuki's chest like a bullet from a large-caliber rifle.

Even after the echoes created by the large underground dome faded and disappeared, Haruyuki couldn't react. Ardor Maiden took a step forward instead and called back in her clear voice, "That's not possible! Lotus would never launch a surprise attack like that. And to attack using an Enemy! She just wouldn't!"

"Shut it! Shut up shut up shut uuuuuup!!" The cry that gushed out of Blaze Heart had thrown off the sweetness of the idol and was somehow colored with grief. She clenched both her hands in front of her, and her small body shook violently as she continued to push the words out. "She did it, though! Two and a half years ago...a cowardly surprise attack on the previous Red King! Red Rider! She killed him, didn't sheeeee?!"

"...!"

Haruyuki suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe, and he unconsciously pressed a hand to his chest. He tried to take in the virtual air, but the sensation of his throat being blocked wouldn't leave. He absolutely could not believe that Black Lotus—that Kuroyukihime—would have planned a surprise attack in the Unlimited Neutral Field on the Red Legion with a Legend-class Enemy, but it was a fact that she had caught the former Red King in a surprise attack and forced him to total point loss. There were many threads leading up to that tragedy, but Haruyuki didn't have the time or the right to explain them all.

This time, neither Utai nor Akira moved to refute the claim. Blaze Heart lowered her voice just the slightest bit and said to the silent members of Nega Nebulus, "...The second Red King, Scarlet Rain, also took part in the Enemy hunt yesterday. The Black King simply set a Legend class on her and disappeared, but it was obvious that if Rain had gotten into a tight spot, she would have shown up again to try to land the killing blow."

Hearing this, Haruyuki finally pushed aside tightness in his throat and asked, "S-so then, Rain...the Red King's okay, right?!"

"Of coooooourse! 'Cos we were there with her! And as if we're gonna let you kill our master ever again! Not one more tiiiiiii-me!!"

Upon Blaze's declaration, Peach brandished her umbrella rifle, and Ochre snapped out the claws of both hands.

Haruyuki had been told that with the disappearance of the previous Red King two and a half years earlier, Prominence had been destroyed as a Legion. The former Promi members had split off into several groups and were locked in combat with the members of the small-and medium-size Legions that came to challenge them; it had apparently been something like the Warring States period of ancient times.

The one who stepped up and took the lead in this massive confusion, piling victory upon victory until she eventually reached level nine, the proof of kingship, was the Immobile Fortress, the Bloody Storm, Scarlet Rain. After she became the second Red King, Prominence was reformed with her as a pillar, and things settled back down in the Nerima area. But not too many of the old members stayed in this new Prominence. The scale of thirty or so members was proof of that fact, making it the smallest of the current six Great Legions.

But from what he could infer from the way she talked, Blaze Heart was a holdover from the old Prominence. And given that

Peach Parasol and Ochre Prison were also taking part in this territory attack, they probably were, too.

“...So then, Blaze, the reason you and your comrades are attacking Suginami is...to fight Black Lotus?” Haruyuki asked, and the three attackers nodded resolutely.

“That’s right! When she’s in her territory, we can’t challenge her to a regular duel! Rain said not to move until she can get a hold on the situation, but...we just can’t allow this! Even three against one, I don’t think we could beat the Black King, but, but at least one blow! We won’t be satisfied until we punch her a gooooooooood one!!” As Peach shouted this, Haruyuki definitely saw a battle spirit that resembled flames flicker faintly around her right fist.

There was no way the Black King had used an Enemy to hunt the Red King—absolutely none. To Kuroyukihime, Niko was no longer just the head of a Legion they had a cease-fire with. She was a cherished friend in the real world. Just like it was for Haruyuki.

So if Blaze and her companions were saying they saw Black Lotus on the back of a Legend-class Enemy, then he could only assume it was a trick set up by a force that was neither Nega Nebulus nor Prominence. But even if he explained that here and now, the three enemy Linkers were burning with such anger that they likely wouldn’t accept it. The grudge from Red Rider’s fall was pushing them forward.

“...Unfortunately, the Black King is not in this stage,” Aqua Current uttered abruptly, quietly. She reached out her right hand and clenched it, scattering water droplets. “So we’ll prove it to you on her behalf. The fact that Black Lotus and the Nega Nebulus she leads would absolutely never set up a sneak attack on your king.”

“And how are you going to prove that?! We’re not interested in

your little excuses!” Peach Parasol shouted.

“Naturally, we will not rely on words,” Ardor Maiden responded boldly, not flinching at the gun barrel that threatened to erupt in flames at any moment. “We are Burst Linkers. So we speak with our fists and our battle cries!” Utai thrust out her right hand just like Akira had and made an adorable fist.

Although Haruyuki felt like he should say something, too, he unfortunately couldn’t come up with anything to add to the declarations of the two more experienced fighters. Left with no choice, he silently followed their example and stretched a tight fist out.

Seeing the three fists lined up, Blaze Heart started to call something out reflexively, but she swallowed it down hard. After a second, she replied, “Just what we were hoping for! We’ll kick you down before we get to the Black King!!” She opened her right fist—still thrust out—and continued, “Mic onnnnnnnnn!”

This was apparently a key word, since a red light gathered around the palm of her hand to produce a single object. For an Enhanced Armament, it was fairly small. The cylinder, which was twenty centimeters or so long with a rounded end, was indeed the very definition of a microphone.

Maiden, the Black team’s long-distance fighter, also called up her Enhanced Armament: “That the path of the bow and arrow does not stray.”

When she uttered this poetic phrase, flames gathered in her left hand and stretched up and down to generate a slender long-bow. Named “Flame Caller,” the powerful weapon combined force and accuracy.

In Territory Battles of three against three, it often happened that the teams scattered before meeting, so that right from the start it was one-on-one duels in three different places. But when both sides met while still together like this, the synergistic effects

of abilities, the speed at which team members understood each other—in other words, teamwork—became an important element in deciding victory.

In that sense, the three members of Nega Nebulus were at a disadvantage. This was the first Territories duel for the team of Ardor Maiden, Aqua Current, and Silver Crow. They hadn't developed a single three-person combo technique.

So then scatter and take it to one-on-one?! Or aim for improvised combo techniques?! As if targeting Haruyuki's fleeting hesitation, the Promi team took the lead in moving. Actually, more precisely, they'd started before he even knew it. Ochre Prison, who hadn't said a single word so far, was not simply a silent character, but apparently was getting ready to activate some secret technique.

"Edged Cage!!" he shouted in a throaty voice. He plunged his hands, equipped with the enormous claws that were his most significant feature, up to the wrists in the filthy water at his feet.

Instinctively determining this to be a grounder type of attack, Haruyuki sent his eyes racing through the water. There were nearly twenty meters between the two teams. No matter how fast the technique was, it was possible to see it and get out of the way.

Clang! The heavy, sharp metallic sound echoed in all directions. Rising up from the water to surround Haruyuki and his team were Ochre's claws made enormous—now many times larger than they had been. And it wasn't just their size; their number had also increased. Nearly thirty claws, lined up with a gap of a mere twenty centimeters between them, came together and closed above their heads.

In the blink of an eye, the Black team had been confined in a cage of steel claws. Though when Haruyuki thought about it, "ochre" was basically a pure, indirect-type yellow. There was no reason an avatar like that would have a special attack that was

simple, straightforward long-distance firepower.

“...You were a little too late in inferring the nature of the attack,” Akira murmured, pressed up against Haruyuki to avoid touching the cage. From her tone, she had somehow guessed that Ochre’s technique was a capture type, but had waited for Haruyuki’s instruction as per her previous declaration.

“I-I’m sorry!” he shouted, flustered at the sudden error. “I’ll break it right away!”

At a glance, the individual claws didn’t look that strong. But just when he’d clenched his fist to smash it, he was stopped by Utai. “You have to look carefully. The claws all have blades on the inner edge. If you simply punch them, you’ll be the one to take damage.”

“Nngh...” Indeed, all the claws making up the cage had sharp edges like razor blades, facing inward rather than outward. No matter how resistant to slicing attacks Silver Crow was as a metal color, he wouldn’t get off scot-free if he punched the blade. It was possible to hit the side with all his might and break out that way, but since there were only twenty centimeters between each set of claws, he couldn’t get the correct angle for a punch.

“R-right...A special attack for a special attack!” Haruyuki clenched his left hand and blocked with both fists in front of his face. Silver Crow’s lone special attack, Head Butt, required a large motion and took a long time to charge up, and even if he did manage to launch it in the middle of high-speed, hand-to-hand combat, it wouldn’t land on its target. But if he used it against a motionless object, the effect was huge. He glanced up at his special-attack gauge and confirmed that it was just barely charged enough.

With his arms still crossed, he leaned back, and light began to gather at his forehead with a screeching sound. The two more experienced Burst Linkers, seeing this, commented coolly once

more.

“I don’t think the aim is bad, but...”

“Is it time to use it now?”

—*What?* Haruyuki said in his heart.

“As if I’d let yoooouuuu!” Blaze Heart shouted. “Searing Noooooote!”

She yelled the technique name loudly toward the mic in her right hand. The mic glittered red, and then, almost as though the voice itself had sparked it, an enormous flaming eighth note was generated in midair.

Krrrr! Roaring, the deadly annotation charged toward them, and Haruyuki instantly knew he wouldn’t make it in time. Since he had a pretty good idea of what would happen if he ignored his instincts and insisted on activating his special attack, he quickly dropped his arms.

The light gathering at his forehead dissipated futilely into the air, and shaking off any regret, he shouted, “Defensive formation!” At the same time, he tried to step out in front of his teammates to use his metal shell’s heat tolerance as a shield.

But getting the jump on him was Aqua Current. “Roger.” With a single word, she wrapped her arms around Crow and Maiden and then shifted the flowing-water armor of her body to envelop all three of them.

The flying, flaming eighth note touched the top of the cage of blades and split into four thirty-second notes, which dropped down around the cage, bounced once, and exploded.

The flash colored his field of view orange, and then a swirling vortex of fire pressed in on them from all sides. The flames

slipped through the gaps between the claws and filled the inside of the cage. In an instant, the three-centimeter-thick layer of water heated up, and a powerful sensation of heat was communicated to Haruyuki's body. Fortunately, however, the temperature stopped increasing right around the level of a fairly hot bath. The strength of the blaze weakened and flowed back outside the cage again.

"Th-thank you...That's just like you, Curren." Since they were still wrapped in a layer of water, his words sounded burbly.

Akira quickly shook her head. "If we're hit with that attack again, the water will boil and evaporate. I can replenish from the lake below, but that water's fairly dirty, so it'd take time to purify it."

Aqua Current meant that she could supplement losses to her water armor with water from the stage, but she had to remove any impurities before she could use it. The muddy water of a Sewer stage was, in that sense, very nearly the absolute worst. The only dirtier water he could think of was the poison bogs of the Corroded Forest stage or the blood ponds of the top-level, dark-type Deadly Sin stage.

"But...they shouldn't be able to shoot off a large attack like that in succession...", Haruyuki said, searching for a way to escape with one half of his brain. Given that Blaze Heart's attack of throwing flaming music notes looked very impressive and had a wide effect range, it had to have eaten up a fair bit of her special-attack gauge. And in this Sewer stage, breaking objects other than the oil drums didn't charge your gauge. Before the next music note attack came, she'd have to charge her special-attack gauge somehow.

Once his thoughts reached this point, he finally realized it: There was a way to recover your gauge more easily than oil drums, and forever on top of that.

“Crap...!” By the time the word slipped unconsciously from Haruyuki’s mouth, Blaze Heart was already starting to run to the right. What she was aiming for was, of course, the large energy charger in the center of the underground dome, the stronghold. Right now, it was still neutral, but thirty seconds after an avatar entered the metal ring, it would shift to occupied status, and the function to charge special-attack gauges would be opened. When that happened, Blaze would be free to shoot off as many flaming music notes as she wanted.

They had to prevent her from occupying the foothold at least. The only way that would be possible when they were locked up in this cage of blades was with the longbow Ardor Maiden carried. But naturally, the enemy was likely anticipating that. There was no doubt in his mind that Peach Parasol and her large rifle were doing nothing but standing by because she was waiting on Maiden’s shot. So then...

“...Curren, on the count of three, pull back your water, and Mei, please aim for Blaze with your bow.” When he gave the instructions in a quiet voice, Utai and Akira nodded slightly.

Three, two, one. Counting down to zero, Haruyuki quickly crouched down. At the same time as the layer of water blanketing the three of them returned to Current’s body, Ardor Maiden, who had been in Silver Crow’s shadow up to that point, lifted the bow in her left hand. When her right hand touched the bowstring, a flame arrow glittered red, and she pulled it back with all her might.

However, the instant she saw Maiden’s bow, Peach Parasol also moved. “I’m not letting that happen!”

She had no sooner dashed over to the line that connected Maiden and Blaze than she was opening her umbrella all the way. The flower petal-like metal plates expanded to a second level and instantly formed a circular shield extending a meter and a half in diameter. No matter how much power Maiden’s flame arrow con-

tained, it would have been difficult to destroy a defensive Enhanced Armament with a normal attack. It was a different story if you fired over and over at the same place, but in the time it took for something like that, Blaze would have easily overtaken the foothold.

However, Haruyuki's true aim was not Blaze Heart as she took over the foothold. Still crouching, he changed the direction he was facing and vibrated the wings that were just half-deployed on his back with all his might. Normally, he would shoot forward and crash into the blades of the cage, dragging Utai and Akira along with him, but that didn't happen—because the tips of his wings were sunk deeply into the muddy water on the floor of the stage.

Instead, the high-frequency vibration of the metallic fins dredged up water and changed it into mist, generating an enormous cloud of fog to their rear. The white haze flowed toward Peach and robbed her of her view. Naturally, Maiden couldn't see Peach or Blaze, either, but Haruyuki had only ordered her to aim. The shooting was, naturally, another obstacle altogether.

“Mei, Ochre!”

“Roger! Understood!” At a speed that suggested she had anticipated this instruction from Haruyuki, Utai changed the angle of her flame arrow. The instant she had Ochre Prison in her sights—who couldn't move while he was maintaining the cage of knives—she was launching her arrow without a moment's hesitation.

Ochre had to have been able to see Utai, but he couldn't move while the capture technique was active. The flame arrow flew through the air, carving out a red trajectory in space, and hit home squarely on Ochre's round head, which was wrapped in a frame like a birdcage.

Whoosh! The flames that rose up enveloped his head.

“Mwaaaah...!” Speaking for the second time that day, Ochre Prison threw his head back. As his arms were yanked out of the water, the cage of knives that restrained Haruyuki and his team sank into the water and disappeared.

Haruyuki couldn't let this chance get away. But he also didn't have time to give detailed instructions. Thus, he simply shouted, “I'll leave the rest to you!”

With this instruction that probably meant he was a failure as a leader, he used up the last tiny bit remaining in his special-attack gauge and flew. His gauge was used up immediately after taking off, but it was more than enough to leap a mere twenty meters. Crow flew past Peach Parasol, still cloaked in thick fog and panicking, and plunged forward toward the foothold on the other side of her. The indicator bar on the ring showed that the time remaining to occupation was two seconds...one second...

“Aaaaah!!”

“Wha—?!” Blaze Heart finally noticed Crow descending on her as he crashed into her.

He had to get his opponent out of the foothold. With nothing else in his head, Haruyuki crouched down to yank her from the little island, and from the force of it, plunged into the muddy water together with Blaze.

“Aaaaah! Let gooooo! So dirty! It stinks! It's slimyyyyyy!!”

“I-I'm not in love with it eeeeeeeither!!” he shouted back, desperately restraining the flailing Blaze. It wasn't like the occupy timer would reset because he'd chased her from the ring. He had to keep her away from it until it gradually dropped to zero.

He was honestly reluctant to use a hold on a small-statured F-type avatar with an idol-like design, and a flat-chested one to boot, but if he loosened his grip even a little, she might slip away

with the help of the slime. So he used not just both hands but also his feet to keep her pinned.

“C-c-come onnnnn! What are you doing to Heartchiiii?!” Finally free of the thick fog, Peach Parasol closed her enormous umbrella even as her eye lenses threatened to jump off her face mask. The gun muzzle tip stretched out with a *chak*, and the Enhanced Armament changed from shield to rifle mode. “Die, you perv! Yeah!!” Flying into such a rage that any thought that she might accidentally shoot “Heartchi” had flown right out of her head, Peach readied her rifle to shoot Haruyuki.

“Whoa! Don’t shoooot!” shrieked Blaze.

“I’m not a perv!” Haruyuki tried shouting, but the murderous rage in Peach’s eyes didn’t disappear.

“Charge Shot!!” When the trigger was pulled, light gathered at the muzzle for a moment before a ragged flame jetted out. The large-diameter, glittering pink bullet grazed Haruyuki’s helmet with a *choon!*, skipped up against Blaze’s ribbon, and then shot up a massive column of water nearby.

“Eee! Uh, um, do something about that!!” Haruyuki shouted.

The idol avatar shook her head back and forth quickly, as if having forgotten for a moment that she was pinned down. “Once Peacchi gets like that, she won’t stop until her target’s full of holes!”

“Wh-what?! So she’s a sniper who’s snapped?”

Even during this exchange, Peach was yanking the bolt handle of the rifle with a high-pitched sound and ejecting the round to ready the gun once more. Haruyuki and Blaze both shuddered and clung to each other unconsciously.

Fortunately, however, the next round was not launched. In the

large underground dome, he heard the call of a technique name in a clear voice tinged with exasperation. “Flame Torrent.”

The longbow was turned diagonally upward to launch a flame arrow. Once the arrow passed the peak of the parabola, it split into dozens more, transforming into a crimson rain on Peach Parasol’s head.

“Waaah?!” she cried out, apparently snapped out of berserker mode. The folded plates enclosing the rifle body opened, and she hid herself under the Enhanced Armament, which was turned umbrella once again. A rain of flames poured down.

The range of the technique was surprisingly small—the flame arrows didn’t reach as far as Haruyuki and Blaze—but being within its range was pretty awful. Of course, the ground was covered in water, but the arrows continued to burn even after they fell on the water surface. A large number of them also pierced Peach’s umbrella, and she was evidently in a burning hell.

“Th-that’s Negabu’s Testarossa...” Blaze Heart’s trembling voice came from under him.

“Huh? D-do you know her?” Haruyuki asked unconsciously.

“Everyone at the midlevel of Promi’s heard the rumors. She’d fly in carried by the ICBM Sky Raker and then turn the field into a sea of flames with that technique. And then finally she’d drop down on the foothold, a fireball herself.”

“Wh-whoa...” Trembling along with Blaze, he remembered now the stories he’d heard. The second Red King, Niko herself, had said that even she’d gotten into a world of hurt when Maiden had dropped down at close range during the Territories way back when. And it was true that if an avatar with that kind of firepower occupied the foothold, it would be a difficult job to get close to it, much less get it back.

Immediately after he had this thought, Ardor Maiden completed the occupation of the foothold, and the metal ring was colored the Legion's shade of black.

"C, I'll keep Peach in check!" Utai shouted to Haruyuki, pulling back her bowstring as it pointed at the sky.

"I've got Ochre," Akira's voice added from a distance. "Crow, you two leaders settle this!"

When Haruyuki glanced behind him, Aqua Current was toying with Ochre Prison, who flailed and slashed with his claws while she danced around at high speed like flowing water itself. If the two veterans were on top of the rest of the Prominence team, he wouldn't have to worry about any simple counterattacks.

Haruyuki met the eyes of Blaze Heart, who was still pinned beneath him. Silently, they reached a mutual understanding and pulled away from each other, bounding up from the muck.

"Aaaall right...Now it's for real, one-on-one, black and white—I mean, red and black, we'll settle this!"

"Wh-when you put it like that, it sounds like we're already the losers. But this is just what I was hoping for!"

Haruyuki readied himself, sending water droplets flying, and Blaze showed off her spin and pose once more. There weren't even two meters between them, but he didn't get the sense that his opponent was falling back.

"You're prob'ly thinking 'hand-to-hand with a long-distance red'!" Hitting the nail on the head, Blaze let a grin rise up on her adorable face mask. "Let me tell you! Long-distance red is the red of flames! And the red of flames, well"—she pressed the mic in her right hand to her mouth and said, ridiculously loud—"is the red of hot bloooooood! Burning Heaaaaaaaart!!"

As her voice touched the bright red mic, sparks flew off and started to burn. Searing Note, the special attack Blaze has used twice up to that point, was a long-distance attack that generated flame notes from her voice. So Haruyuki reflexively moved out of the path of the mic.

But what it produced this time was not a music note but an enormous heart, which shone so red it was dazzling. And this crumbled immediately after it was generated to wrap Blaze herself in an intense fire. The long pigtails also changed to flames and stood on end, undulating. Her eye lenses, which had been a sapphire color up to that point, turned into rubies.

“Silver Crow!!” Transformed into the spirit of fire, Blaze Heart shouted in a voice tinged with a high-pitched, metallic edge, “If you believe in your master, then try to stop my fists with those feeliiiiiiiings!!”

As if unable to withstand the heat of that line, even the mic clutched in her right hand burned up, becoming a massive fire that enveloped her fist.

The water on the ground around Blaze began to burble and boil. Wondering how an avatar could have this high of a temperature and still be all right, Haruyuki glanced at the enemy health gauge in the top right of his field of view and saw that she wasn’t, in the end, entirely okay. Blaze Heart’s gauge was decreasing with each passing second, meaning she was also burning herself with those flames.

So then if I run around and dodge, she’ll eventually destroy herself?

It would have been a lie to say the thought didn’t cross his mind. Or rather that, if this were a normal duel, a normal Territories match, Haruyuki wouldn’t have hesitated to do exactly that. But Blaze Heart and her comrades were enraged that their beloved leader had been set up for an Enemy kill, and they had

attacked Suginami area to land just one blow—even though they knew they could never be victorious in an encounter with the Black King.

In which case, running away was basically the same as confessing that the feelings of love he had for Kuroyukihime, his own Legion Master and parent, were inferior to the passion of Blaze and her comrades. It was emotion, rather than logic, that told Haruyuki this.

“...Obviously I believe in her!!” he shouted, clenching his right hand into a fist, and he dropped his hips to ready himself. Naturally, since using the Incarnate system in any normal duel, including the Territories, was the greatest taboo, he couldn’t make his fist shine like Blaze’s, but even still, his focused battle spirit became a faint signal transmitted to the BB Imagination Control System, and something like a heat haze shimmered around his fist.

Seeing Haruyuki brace himself, Blaze brought an MC’s grin across her face. “Thaaaat’s the spirit! No tricks...Here I coooooooooome!!” Kicking up stagnant water, she charged at him in a straight line. Whirling around once, she launched her blazing fist into an impressively forceful right straight.

At the same time, Haruyuki also leapt forward. In contrast to Blaze’s showy motion, he barely raised his arm. Instead, he simply drew back his fist and accelerated with a kick.

The incandescent meteor of Blaze’s punch and the almost pure-white beam of light of Haruyuki’s carved out exactly the same trajectory and smashed into each other. A light effect of fire and light canceling each other out shimmered in the air, and a little after that, the impact wave shook the stage. The water below their feet turned hot and was pushed back by the pressure, revealing the concrete floor.

However zealous an idol she might have been, Blaze Heart was

still a long-distance type. Her striking power and armor strength were fundamentally different from those of Silver Crow, a close-range metal type. But while unable to push Crow's fist back, Blaze's did stop it solidly with the help of her special attack.

In this situation, the advantage went to Blaze. Swallowed in flames, Crow's fist instantly became red-hot, and his health gauge started to slowly decrease. He might have had the high heat resistance of the metal colors, but the melting point of silver was fairly low compared with that of iron or tungsten. If he stayed in direct contact like this, his armor would melt away, and not only his fist but the majority of his right arm would be blown off.

"...Are you not moving because you're sneering at my flames?! Or are you just an iiiidiot?!" Blaze shouted, still in this contest of strength with Haruyuki, her tone triumphant and yet somehow slightly dissatisfied.

"The latter!" he shouted back even through the scorching heat.

Meeting her head-on like this and then continuing the pointless contest of strength was, strategically speaking, the height of folly. But this situation was precisely what Haruyuki wanted. From between clenched teeth, he squeezed out what voice he could. "But I know my parent, the Black King, would do this, too! 'Throw clever retreats to the dogs; once you dive into the stage, the only thing is to duel with all you have'...That's her teaching!"

"...!"

Instantly, Blaze opened her crimson eye lenses wide.

Haruyuki wanted to go further and tell her, *Which is why the Black King would never incite an Enemy and then run off on her own*, but he couldn't communicate all his feelings with words alone. In the end, it was the fist. He had to tell Blaze with the battle spirit in his fists.

The armor of his right hand passed the red-hot stage and glittered orange, apparently finally on the verge of melting. His health gauge dropped more quickly, already cut down to 70 percent.

From here, it was next to impossible to push back Blaze's enhanced fist. But in the back of Haruyuki's brain lived a single image: That of a super-hard metal color who, despite being as small as Silver Crow, slammed dead-on into a large avatar and failed to retreat a single step. Wolfram Cerberus.

The force of Cerberus's punches and head butts wasn't dependent only on the performance of the tungsten armor he was born with. The reason why it was so hard, so heavy, was that he put all of himself into his blows. Every ounce of energy the duel avatar produced was focused on the one point, the one moment of impact.

What made this possible was his incredibly tough joints. Cerberus probably locked all the joints on his body in the moment of attack to become a single lump of metal that crashed into the enemy. It was a technique that was the polar opposite of the Way of the Flexible—the idea of making the entire body soft to accept and let flow the enemy's attack—that Haruyuki had learned from Kuroyukihime. The so-called Way of the Stiff. That was what made Cerberus's technique a knockout blow.

Naturally, without the hardness and weight of tungsten or the same joint strength, Silver Crow couldn't flat-out copy Cerberus's Way of the Stiff. But even if it wasn't possible with his whole body, he could definitely turn at least his right arm into a lump of steel for just a moment. Before he learned about the Incarnate system, Haruyuki had gouged the incredibly hard wall of a building in the Demon City stage with his bare hands, so Crow's arms had to have that much hardness to them.

Haruyuki turned his body slightly and stretched out straight the right arm that continued to fight Blaze's punch. He brought

his wrist, elbow, shoulder, and even the right wing extending from his shoulder blade into a single straight line, imagining passing a steel shaft through there. If his joints bent or warped even a tiny bit, his arm wouldn't be able to completely endure the action and would break.

Cerberus, I'm just going to borrow your technique, he murmured to the duel avatar with the wolflike head—no, to the younger boy he'd had a fleeting encounter with in the real—and abruptly stopped breathing. From his perspective, he had a few seconds before the armor of his right hand melted. This was his first and last chance.

“Here I go, Blaze!!”

Perhaps sensing the end of the contest was at hand even before Haruyuki shouted this, Blaze Heart also responded in a flash, “Come, Crow!!”

Her flames burned noticeably brighter, and in that instant, Haruyuki kicked fiercely off the ground with both feet. At the same time, he forced the wings on his back to full power. A roar shook the air like the firing of a large-caliber rifle, and massive quantities of sparks scattered from Crow's right wrist, elbow, and shoulder. But his arm did not bend or crumple; instead, it shot forward with a strength and speed on par with Cerberus's iron fist or even Cyan Pile's Pile Driver.

The flames enveloping Blaze Heart's fist cut a perfect circle into the air and then scattered just before the small avatar was bounced back from the force and crashed into the distant wall of the dome.

Three minutes later.

Peach Parasol, her umbrella Enhanced Armament full of holes from Ardor Maiden's Flame Torrent; Ochre Prison, all the claws on both hands severed by an unknown technique of Aqua Cur-

rent's; and Blaze Heart, entire body burned to a crisp, got together in a line and bowed their heads at the same time, declaring in unison, "We give up!!"

All six fighters had escaped from the dark, confined, slippery sewers and moved aboveground to Kanpachi Street. The time remaining was five minutes and a dozen or so seconds, and if the Territory Battle ended like this, it would be a victory for Haruyuki's team from the combined value of their health gauges.

Even so, Haruyuki maintained the bare minimum of caution that Burst Linker etiquette dictated as he returned a light bow. "Uh, um. GG—no, I mean, good game."

Hearing this, the three members of Prominence lifted their faces and exchanged glances before smiling together—although Haruyuki still didn't know what were the eyes and what was the mouth in Ochre's birdcage mask.

Haruyuki didn't understand the reason for their reaction, and seeing his perplexed face, Peach Parasol said on their behalf, "You get that Pard speak from Pard herself?"

"Oh! R-right...Yeah, basically."

Pard, aka Blood Leopard, who made free use of all kinds of abbreviations not just within the game but in real-life conversation as well, was one of the Triplex, the senior executives of the Red Legion. Naturally, Peach and the others would have been hearing Pard-speak on a regular basis.

All three of them relaxed their shoulders, and not letting the opportunity slip by, Haruyuki ever-so-timidly broached the taboo topic. "Um, about the Enemy kill in the Unlimited Neutral Field that you were talking about before the fight..."

"You don't have to say any more than that." Blaze Heart raised her right hand and shook her head lightly. "To be honest, I'm still

not particularly interested in accepting everything you say...I can't believe there's another duel avatar besides Black Lotus in the Accelerated World who's that black and that pointed. But—" She cut herself off for a moment and dropped her gaze to her right hand, slowly closing it as if confirming the sensation of impact lingering there. "But I know at least that you completely believe in your own master. The way we believe in Scarlet Rain. So we're gonna swallow a whole bunch of things right now. 'Cos our master told us to."

"Th-tha—" Haruyuki reflexively opened his mouth to thank her, and Blaze stopped him again with her right hand.

"I can't accept those words. Even setting aside the Enemy-kill issue, it's an indisputable fact that Black Lotus pushed Red Rider to total point loss with a surprise attack. This alone we can't forget, no matter what Rain and Pard say. So the three of us are never gonna be friends with your Nega Nebulus."

"..."

Haruyuki resisted the urge to tell them that even with the Red Rider incident, there were circumstances the three of them didn't know about. But just as Blaze had said, a fact was a fact. Kuroyukihime had taken the head of the former Red King in her desire to reach level ten. That had been her own choice, and the resentment and hatred that Blaze and her comrades had now was a result of that choice. Even her child, Haruyuki, couldn't intervene in that fate from the sidelines. So he simply nodded silently.

With the time remaining at two minutes, the three members of the Red Legion turned on their heels together. Territory Battles didn't end until one of the teams was completely annihilated or thirty minutes had passed, but perhaps to indicate that they had nothing left to discuss, they intended to leave Kanpachi Road.

"Tell us just one last thing," Aqua Current called quietly to their receding backs. Blaze Heart stopped and finally looked

back, pigtails swinging. “You said the Black King incited an Enemy to attack and then disappeared. Does that mean she ran off across the ground?”

This question was apparently unexpected, and Blaze blinked her eye lenses, now light blue again, several times, before shaking her head quickly from side to side. “No. She jumped down from the back of the massive Enemy, and then it was like she plunged her entire body into the ground and disappeared.”

6

In the end, four teams came to attack the Suginami area in the Territories the fifth week of June. The breakdown was one team from Leonids, one from Great Wall, one from Pound Bag—the small Legion headquartered in Toshima Ward—and the one team from Prominence.

The defensive team of Haruyuki, Utai, and Akira fought the attacking teams from Pound Bag and Prominence and won both matches. The team of Kuroyukihime and Fuko, short one person, also had perfect victories over the Blue and Green teams. Thus, the result was a win rate of 100 percent for the defending side in all areas, and the Nega Nebulus flag was protected. That said, they'd never actually been overcome since making the territory declaration the previous November.

The reason Nega Nebulus, classified as a small Legion by the number of members, had managed to keep their win ratio in the Territories at 50 percent or more was, of course, because the Black King, the Legion Master with overwhelming attack power, took part in the defense herself. Although level differences were not an absolute wall in Brain Burst, level niners alone were indeed another class altogether. In order to defeat Black Lotus, with her sword limbs that could cut through any object just as her nickname of World End implied, the only thing to do was stop her from moving through some kind of nonphysical hold technique and then concentrate a large amount of long-distance firepower on her, but this was difficult in the Territories, where the number of people on the attacking side was restricted.

Thus, in the current state of things, when the other Kings did not come themselves to attack, the areas that could possibly fall

were limited to the ones Kuroyukihime was not defending. In fact, the three-person team of younger members (Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri) lost from time to time, but they usually managed a win rate of 50 percent with one win out of two, or two out of three, so while it was close, they did protect their flag. If they lost with a team that included two of the Four Elements, even if Kuroyukihime wasn't there, Haruyuki saw that as his responsibility, since he was charged with leading the team in her absence.

Thus, the instant they returned to the rear courtyard of Umesato Junior High when the time limit for that week's Territories was up, Haruyuki slid down on the bench. "Haaah...Th-thank goodness...We didn't lose..."

It was a far cry from a shout of victory. Beside him, Utai offered a faint, wry smile. UI> VERY NICE WORK, ARITA. IN THE SECOND DUEL AGAINST POUND BAG, YOU DISPLAYED SOME FAIRLY STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP.

At a glance, the words spelled out in the chat window were ones of praise, but they also pointed out by omission that his leadership hadn't quite reached the domain of "fully," even in the first duel against Prominence.

Shrinking into himself, Haruyuki tried an excuse on the fourth grader, who was still very much his senior. "If you'd at least designated me leader in advance, I could have mentally prepared a little more."

UI> IN ALL SITUATIONS, YOU MUST ADAPT TO THE MOMENT!

"Y-yeah, I guess so...But it's really great that Curren came back, huh? And now we have a lot more leeway in the formation of teams for the Territories."

He had no sooner uttered this in the most offhand way than Utai pursed her lips adorably and glared up at him. With that

look still on her face, she tapped quickly at her holokeyboard with both hands. UI> WHEN DID YOU FIND OUT, ARITA? THAT REN WAS COMING BACK TO NEGA NEBULUS?

“Th-the night before last.” Faced with the question, Haruyuki couldn’t hide it any longer. At any rate, he had said before the Territories that it was a secret for the reason of happy faces. “So it still hasn’t been forty-eight hours! I was surprised, you know. Curren suddenly showed up in the middle of the Battle Royale and saved me and Ash. A-and, look, you just said you have to adapt—”

UI> I WAS TALKING ABOUT IN THE DUEL! she typed forcefully—until her expression abruptly softened.

The light reflected in her large eyes increased bit by bit as they gazed up at Haruyuki. A point of light, the color of the evening sun spilling through a gap in the cloudy sky, finally turned into a drop of water and ran down her cheek.

Haruyuki opened both eyes wide, and cherry-colored text slowly scrolled across his field of view. UI> I’M SURE THIS TIME IS ALSO BECAUSE YOU WERE HERE, ARITA.

“Huh...? Th-this time...?”

UI> IT’S BECAUSE YOU MADE SUCH SINCERE EFFORTS THAT FU AND ME AND SACCHI WERE ABLE TO RETURN TO NEGA NEBULUS. SO I JUST KNOW IT’S THE SAME FOR REN.

“I—I didn’t do anything. In fact, Master and you and, of course, Kuroyukihime all came back to help me. And—I mean—Curren, too.”

UI> YOU SHOULD BE PROUD OF THAT. Utai wiped away the tear with her right hand and stared for a moment at the transparent droplet on her fingertip.

Shifting her gaze to Haruyuki once more, the girl four years his junior opened her lips into a circle. Her mouth strained and trembled. Tendons popped up in her slender neck and twitched.

“Sh-Shinomiya...!” Haruyuki called her name hoarsely. Utai had lost her voice from shock on the day of the accidental death of her real-life older brother and Burst-Linker parent, Kyoya Shinomiya. The only things she could utter in her real voice were two voice commands related to Brain Burst, made possible through years of practice.

The aphasia presented in her voice, but it was an impediment in the functioning of her brain. Utai’s condition was classified as subcortical expressive aphasia, and while it was possible for her to understand and write words normally, spontaneous language—speech with her real voice—was difficult. A neural blockage in the part of the cerebrum called the *precentral gyrus* was the main cause, but in Utai’s case, excessive psychological shock had brought about a malfunction of the relevant neural network, and this could not be recovered even with a brain implant chip.

So if she tried to force herself to speak with her real voice, Utai would have felt not just physical pain, but a great deal of emotional pain. Haruyuki started to raise his hand to stop her, but a moment before he could, a faint but definite sound spilled from her trembling lips into the air and reached his ears.

“Tha...”

Followed by “n.” And finally, “ks.”

By the time she finished uttering the word, beads of sweat had popped up on Utai’s forehead. Even so, a reassuring smile came across her lips, and she bowed her head to him gently.

Desperately holding back the tears that threatened to escape him, Haruyuki murmured, “Me too. Thanks, Shinomiya. For being in this place with me now...really, thank you.”

Utai lifted her head, and her face lit up with an innocent grin reminiscent of her real age.

Once the hands of the clock had come around to five thirty PM, Haruyuki slipped through the incomplete festival gate in front of the school gates, said good-bye to Utai, and headed home alone.

Not only were Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and Chiyuri still not finished getting ready for the school festival but the entire school was filled with the enthusiasm of the night before a celebration, so heading home alone was a little sad. But to stay on school grounds after the mandatory departure time of six PM, he'd have to apply for permission from the school administration to extend the working hours of the exhibition group he belonged to. And since Haruyuki's group in eighth-grade class C had long ago reported that their work was complete, there was, of course, no way he would get that permission.



He trudged out onto Oume Highway and stared hard at the bus stop on the opposite side of the road. If he was going to be chased out of the school anyway, then he wanted to jump onto a bus like he did the day before and take a field trip to Nakano area, but unfortunately, Kuroyukihime had also prohibited that.

The reason was the Red Legion Burst Linkers who had broken the cease-fire (which Haruyuki had reported at the meeting after the Territories were over). Once she had heard the sequence of events, Kuroyukihime was silent for exactly three seconds before she muttered with annoyance, “This is *their* work.”

Haruyuki had a good idea of who exactly she meant, but when she announced, “I will handle this matter,” Haruyuki couldn’t bring himself to say the name. But his Legion Master had continued to speak, her words turned mainly toward Haruyuki: Until the school festival was over, no one was to duel freely outside of Suginami, or even watch a duel.

“...Well, I just have to hang on for one day...”

The school festival would end the following day—Sunday—in the afternoon, so he could assume the ban on travel outside the area would be lifted that night—probably. He hoped. And then he would go to Nakano, duel Wolfram Cerberus again, and say it one more time: *Come with me.*

The next week, a meeting of the Seven Kings would be held, and if they agreed that the performance of the Optical Conduction ability Haruyuki had obtained was equivalent to the Theoretical Mirror ability, then they would finally move out on the joint invasion of Tokyo Midtown Tower. He would stand in the vanguard of the attack on the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron, the most powerful enemy Haruyuki had ever faced outside the God Suzaku. Before all that, he wanted to clarify the invisible threads entangling Cerberus in complex ways and sever them.

The feeling of wanting to help Cerberus was perhaps arrogant, presumptuous, and even self-serving. In no small part because it came down to whether the level-five Silver Crow and the level-one Cerberus had matching battle power as Burst Linkers.

But two nights earlier, the Cerberus that Haruyuki had faced in the real for just a few seconds, with waves of people wedged between them, had eyes that had definitely tried to make some kind of appeal to him. In which case, Haruyuki wanted to answer that call. He wanted to offer his hand, to say something as many times as it took. The way so many people had done for Haruyuki in the past.

“...I’ll definitely come see you tomorrow,” he murmured as he looked up at the fleecy clouds colored purple in the direction of Nakano, and then he started walking home.

When he had gotten into the elevator of B wing, the mail icon in the top right of his field of view started flashing. He launched his mailer, thinking it was probably from his mother, who had left the previous day on an overseas business trip and wouldn’t be back until the following evening. He expected it would be something about how she was sorry she couldn’t come see the school festival—however, the displayed sender was not his mother, but the single letter N.

“...Wh-who?” Cocking his head to one side, he opened the mail, which said only THERE IN FIVE SECONDS. Utterly baffled, he cocked his head to the other side, and then the elevator stopped, so he automatically stepped out.

A moment after he did so, the doors of the neighboring elevator opened. In another unconscious motion, he looked that way, and the “someone” who leapt out forcefully into the hallway snapped a finger at him.

“Hey! It’s been a long— It hasn’t, has it? Maybe five days?”

“Yea— Uh, whaaaa—?! Wh-wh-wh-why are you here?!” Throwing his head back almost too far from the shock of it all, Haruyuki just barely managed to recover his balance and get himself upright again.

“I clearly gave you notice, so you don’t need to act so surprised,” the sender of the mail who had appeared precisely five seconds after the arrival of the mail said, exasperated. “I mean, like, how many times have I been here before already?”

“Uh, um. Three, four...five...”

“It’s just a thing you say. You don’t need to go counting!” Stepping over to him briskly to whack his stomach lightly with a flat hand, the girl with red hair tied back in two bundles on either side of her head—the Red King, Scarlet Rain, aka Yuniko Kozuki, aka Niko—proffered a grin that filled her face and started walking down the hallway to the Arita apartment. Haruyuki, after a bit, managed to restart his brain and hurried after her.

Niko arrived first at the door with the plate 2305, and the instant she tapped the fingers of her right hand on it, there was the sound of the door unlocking, so he was even more stunned. “Wh-whaaaat?! You have the key to our house again?! The expiration of the instant key you had was long—”

“Oh, when you let me stay over that time, I did a little fiddling with your home server and changed it into a perpetual key, so, you know.” Niko uttered this even more terrifying statement as she took off her sneakers. “I’m coming in,” she announced a moment later, heading inside at a pace that said she knew she was the master of this home.

Halfway down the hall, Niko looked back at the still-dumb-founded boy. “I’ll entertain myself, so you can go ahead and change first,” she offered quietly, and then she disappeared into the living room.

“...Notice. I mean, people usually give five hours, not five seconds.” With no other choice, Haruyuki was stuck merely muttering his complaints.

Still, he took Niko up on her suggestion and changed from his uniform into a T-shirt and shorts before returning to the living room, where Niko was lying on her side on the two-person sofa, resting her head on a cushion. The instant he cracked an unconscious smile at seeing her so unabashedly making herself at home, she glared at him out of the corner of her eye.

“What’re you grinning about?”

“I-it’s—nada...B-barley tea okay?”

“Mmm, thanksy.”

He nodded and headed to the kitchen, poured out two glasses of barley tea, and returned to the living room, where he set himself down across from Niko. There, finally, he became aware of the slight unease residing in his heart. He cocked his head from side to side several times before finally stumbling upon the reason.

“Now that I’m thinking of it, why have you been in Normal mode right from the start today, Niko?” he asked.

“Huh?” The sixth-grade girl blinked several times before smiling complacently. “What? You want me to do it?”

She yanked herself upright and faced Haruyuki, placed her hands neatly on knees clamped together, and made a cheery, innocent smile bloom on her face. “I love my big brother, too! I’m so happy!”

She hadn’t activated this angel mode at the curry party five days earlier, so he actually hadn’t seen it in a long time, and it had a real impact on his mind. For a while, his upper body was frozen

while he whipped his head back and forth.

“I—I don’t hate it, but that’s not what I meant. I was just wondering why!” The instant he said this, Haruyuki finally realized that he already knew the reason. Not just why Niko wasn’t in angel mode, but the reason she was making the sudden visit at all.

He took a deep breath and held it in his chest for a while before exhaling. “A-anyway, that is...The reason you’re here...is obviously to talk about what happened in the Unlimited Neutral Field yesterday, right?”

Niko’s face returned to normal, and she slowly leaned back until she flopped up against the sofa back. She nodded, using the reaction of the cushions to help her do it. “Well, there’s that too,” she said somewhat listlessly. “But that’s a third of the reason.”

“Huh? Then what are the other two-thirds?”

“You know half at least. An apology. Gotta apologize.”

“An apology. You mean to say you’re here to say sorry?”

“O’course! I mean, you think I’m here to get all *wabi-sabi* with you and barley tea?”

“H-huh? Niko, you know about tea meanings and stuff?”

“Don’t go underestimat’in’ me! I might look be a kid, but I was in the tea club at school once!”

“Once...So then you’ve quit already?”

“Shaddap! I went all the way, mastered that stuff! So.” Perhaps noticing that at some point she had leaned forward on the sofa and leapt to her feet, Niko blinked several times before a wry smile rose upon her lips. “Aah, honestly, I wonder why I always get like this when I talk to you. Gets me all worked up. Before we

fly off on another tangent, first I'm gonna give you that apology!"

After this crisp announcement, Niko brought her skinny legs together and slapped her hands down on her knees. Then she bowed her head deeply, her tied-back hair and its small black ribbons swinging. "As Legion Master, I sincerely apologize for the three members of Prominence who broke the cease-fire and attacked the Nega Nebulus area in the Territories today! I'm very sorry!"

Haruyuki very nearly smiled at this apology, given the mismatch between the grandiose preamble and the cuteness of her pigtails, but he hurriedly stiffened his mouth at the same time as Niko lifted her face.

"Make sure you tell that to your little Blacky," Niko added smoothly, while he was struggling to figure out how to respond.

"Huh?! M-me?!"

"O'course! What's the point of me apologizing to just you, at the bottom of the Legion ladder?!"

"B-bottom...Th-th-th-then you should've gone to see her right from the start instead of me!"

"Got no choice. This is the only place I know. Aah, c'mon, then I take back the whole ladder thing and promote you to Mysterious Crow Man."

"I-is that a promotion? Why does this hierarchy sound like an evil organization—" He realized they were starting to get off track once again, cleared his throat, and closed his mouth. Setting aside what he wanted to say for the moment, he nodded. "Understood. I'll tell the Black King. But none of us, not me, not Kuroyukihime, not any of the other Legion members, think Blaze Heart and the others were unequivocally wrong in attacking our territory. They had a motive that wouldn't let them do anything else. So if possi-

ble, can you not punish them too harshly, Niko?”

“I was wondering what you’d say, and that’s where you start, huh?” Chuckling, Niko clasped her hands behind her head and nodded lightly. “Well, I obviously can’t let them off scot-free, but I’m thinking I’ll leave it at double the number of attacks during Enemy hunting next week. That said, though, I mean, me, the head of Promi— Can I just be done with an apology in words with no action to go along with it? That’s the question.”

“A-action? Meaning?” Haruyuki asked, suddenly turning semiformal.

Niko glanced at him before stopping once more and bringing her clenched hands to her chest and grinning broadly. “Whaaaat, big brother, is there something you want me to do? Cleaning? Washing? Or...”

“N-no, no, no! You don’t have to do anything! And I mean, it’s ’cos you keep doing that and putting us off track that the conversation goes in weird directions, right?”

“Weiiiiird directions? Like what? I only said that I would help with the housework, though? So then, you must have imagined something weird. Big brother, you’re so kinky. ♡” She maintained the smile at the end for about two seconds, and then smoothly shifted modes and continued. “That just now was good for a ’pology accompanied by action, yeah?”

“U-unh...When you switch modes like that, it kinda makes my head spin, though...”

“Then I’ll go a little faster for you! ♪ So, like, Crow...The real issue is that incident in the Unlimited Neutral Field you started in on before.”

“Unnnh, y-yeah.” He nodded, holding his head in his hands.

“Crow.” Niko, her face now completely the Red King, stared at Haruyuki with a sharp light in her eyes. “You got an idea about the truth of the situation, yeah?”

“Huh? T-truth?”

“...So, like, I don’t think that was the real Lotus riding on the back of that Legend-class, either. I only saw it for a short time, but the information pressure was totally different...”

Niko’s words kick-started Haruyuki’s thinking, and he quickly summarized in his mind all the information he’d obtained so far.

According to Blaze Heart and her comrades, the Red Legion had been hunting Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field the day before—Friday—in a large group of more than twenty people, including the leader, Scarlet Rain. The location: Toshima area; in other words, near Ikebukuro. There, a Legend-class Enemy with a single duel avatar riding on its back appeared suddenly and attacked. The avatar immediately disappeared as if diving into the surface of the ground, and Niko and her group just barely managed to run from the rampaging Enemy to escape through a portal. And the avatar riding the Enemy in question had jet-black armor and sharp limbs like swords...

“Do you mean that the information pressure of the black avatar you saw...was stronger than Kuroyukihime’s?” Haruyuki asked, ever so timidly.

To his surprise, the Red King shook her head. “The opposite. It was a fair bit weaker than Lotus. I mean, my eyes basically couldn’t see the pressure.”

“Information pressure” was Niko’s personal scale for measuring the fighting power latent in a duel avatar and the battle experience accumulated through the ability Vision Extension. With this power, she had seen that, of the Seven Kings of Pure Color, the Green King, Green Grandé, and the Blue King, Blue Knight,

had information pressure that far surpassed that of the others.

But Niko's words now were what was surprising, because if the picture he had in his mind of the true identity of the fake Black Lotus was right, that avatar should have also had an information pressure on par with that of the Seven Kings.

"Y-you couldn't see it. So then that means that the black avatar was a level-one or -two newbie or something?"

"...Hmm, when you put it like that, I feel like that's not quite it, y'know. It's like, even though they were there, they didn't have a real body...Something like that..." Mumbling for a while with her arms crossed, Niko suddenly jerked her head up and glared at him again. "Hey, Crow! The way you're talking, you *do* have some kind of idea, don't you!"

"Uh, umm, ummm..." Pulling back slightly, he wrestled with it for a few seconds, and then resigned himself. "Y-yeah. I'll tell you. Everything I know. But it's gonna be a super-long story, so let's do it while we have supper..."

Haruyuki was about to ask if frozen pizza was okay, but without letting him even start, Niko declared, "Curry!" Apparently, she had very much enjoyed the homemade curry and rice that had made an appearance at the curry party the other day (regardless of what she had said about it), but this request was difficult in the extreme.

"N-no, that's impossible, Niko. I mean, that curry, it was basically just Chiyu and Shinomiya who made it and all."

"I ain't saying make the same thing. If you just chop up the stuff, boil it, put in the roux, something'll work out...I'll help, too, so let's do it, big brother!"

And with that exchange, the mission began, and when they had made it through the shopping phase and the cooking phase to

complete something curry-like, the hands of the analogue clock in the living room had made it around to seven PM.

Once two large plates of rice—he managed to at least get her to allow this to be from frozen stock—and a curry of only potatoes, carrots, onion, and chicken were set out on the table, Haruyuki double-checked something: “Um, Niko, today are you maybe...?”

“Staying over.”

“Y-you are?”

I’m so glad this didn’t clash with the sleepover with Kuroyuki-hime and Master yesterday! This earnest thought in his head, Haruyuki joined Niko in a chorus of “Let’s eat.” He picked up a spoon, got a good balance of curry and rice on it, and timidly brought it to his mouth.

“...O-oh! This is actually...”

“...Huh. This totally works.”

Impressed, they dug in with their spoons at the same time. For all that they had made a fairly simplified version of the preparation video displayed in the AR of the curry roux package, the fact that it tasted like a proper curry seemed amazing, but also totally natural.

After thinking about this, Haruyuki finally remembered the present Niko had given him six months earlier at the time of the Fifth Chrome Disaster incident, and he cocked his head to one side as he scooped up a second spoonful. “Huh? But aren’t you actually good at cooking, Niko?”

“...You can tell from just lookin’ at the carrot on that spoon I chopped there! No big diff from your cooking ability. You trying to pick a fight?!” Niko threatened to shift from Normal mode to Red King mode.

“N-n-no!” Haruyuki hurriedly denied. “I mean, those cookies you gave me before were super tasty, so...”

The instant she heard this, the furrow disappeared from the middle of Niko’s brow, and instead, her cheeks got just a little red. “D-don’t go saying that with a straight face! I-it’s that, right, sweets are different. I mean, Pard’s almost a pro, so I learned a bunch of stuff from her...”

“Ohhh! Is that it...”

Pard, aka Blood Leopard, the second-in-command of Prominence and something like Niko’s guardian, worked at a cake shop in Sakuradai, Nerima Ward. Haruyuki remembered her dashing figure riding her electric motorcycle still wearing her maid-style uniform.

“So then Pard’s not just working the counter, but in the kitchen, too? Wow. I wonder if she’ll go that way in the future.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about? Pard’s that shop’s—” For some reason, Niko clamped her mouth shut and smiled with satisfaction. “Well, whatevs. Anyway, my cooking skill’s limited to sweets, and just the easy ones at that.”

“But those cookies were incredibly crunchy, yet so moist! They were really delici—”

“I’m! Telling! You! Enough of that. Just eat before it gets cold!!” she shouted, and started moving her spoon rather forcefully.

Haruyuki looked at her for a moment, smiling without even realizing it, before he, too, finally scooped up piles of chicken curry and stuffed his cheeks. The carrots and the potatoes were cut in awkward chunks and a little overdone, but it was several times more delicious than whatever frozen dinner he would have eaten by himself.

When they had both had another plateful, the small pot was perfectly empty, so they worked together to clean up, took turns in the bath, and finished their homework sitting alongside each other on the sofa. Before they knew it, it was nine PM.

Haruyuki usually went to bed around eleven, but since Niko was yawning mightily, he stood up, thinking that he'd go to bed early that day, too. The following day was finally the school festival, so it was best to get a good night's sleep.

"My mom won't be home until tomorrow, so you can use her room," Haruyuki said.

"Wohaahkay," Niko replied, with a second yawn in the middle, wearing a long T-shirt instead of pajamas, and obediently headed for his mother's bedroom.

They said good night to each other in the hallway, and when her small back had disappeared beyond the door, he let out a sigh before going into his own bedroom on the opposite side. He set the alarm clock by his bed with a voice command and flopped down onto his bed. He used to take off his Neurolinker when he went to bed, but recently, he'd been leaving it on a lot. He sometimes got calls from other Legion members while he was asleep, albeit very rarely; upon answering, he would be basically half-asleep and give strange replies, but even so, he wanted to respond to their calls. Haruyuki knew all too well the feeling of sudden helplessness in the middle of the night and the desire for a connection with someone.

Thus, he turned out the lights, closed his eyes, and thought that the voice he heard just as his mind was sinking over the edge of sleep was an online voice call.

"Hey, you already asleep, Crow?"

"Ah...Mmm, mmm, I'm still awa..."

“...So then I wanna talk.”

“Shhure, go ahead...” Blinking his eyes in the darkness, he waited for the conversation supposedly over the network to continue.

Fwump! The bed suddenly shook, and Haruyuki jumped about three centimeters into the air in surprise.

“Nwah?! N-n-night-light on!” He hurriedly called for the night-light and turned to the left, where he found the unmistakable form of Niko. She was lying on her side on the bed, supporting her head with her right hand, and glaring at Haruyuki with a grumpy look on her face.

Maybe it's not a voice call, but a dive call? Is that Niko's avatar? he thought with a head that still hadn't reached full wakefulness, and he started to reach out to try touching it, but right before he did, he noticed the fresh scent of soap.

You couldn't set a smell for your avatar. This scent was also clearly that of the soap always used in the Arita bathroom, and there was no reason why Niko would go out of her way to re-create it. Which meant...

“...Y-you're real?”

“O'course.”

“...Wh-why...? Oh! Right, it's okay. There are no monsters in my mom's room.”

“That ain't it!” She slapped Haruyuki's stomach with her left hand. “So, like, when I think about it, you didn't tell me the first thing about what's actually important?”

“I-important...?” After staring intently at Niko's face illuminated by the indirect, gentle orange light for a few seconds,

Haruyuki finally remembered. He had indeed said a few hours earlier, before they made the curry, that it would be a long story so they should do it over supper. And that long story was about the mysterious black avatar who had attacked the Red King with a Legend-class Enemy.

“Oh. Oh! Right! That’s right!” He sat up in bed and instinctively sat in the formal kneeling posture before bowing his head. “S-sorry! I forgot! I wasn’t trying to slip anything by you or anything. It was just, the curry was better than I thought it’d be, so I sort of went into a trance eating it. Of course I’ll tell you. So, um, anyway, we can just go to the living—”

“Too much of a hassle. We can do it here like this.”

Haruyuki was lifting himself off the bed when Niko cut him off and flopped over onto her back and closed her eyes.

“Like this,” she says, but I mean... After a moment of internal conflict, Haruyuki had no choice but to sit up again. Now that he thought about it, they had slept next to each other in this very bed five days earlier. And someone might say that this was fine since it was the second time, but it was clearly not fine. However, given that this was the Red King, he also had the feeling that he couldn’t say no.

“All that said, I actually have a fairly good idea of it myself,” Niko murmured abruptly, so Haruyuki put his thoughts on pause and looked to his side.

Niko, red hair freed from her ribbons and spread out on the pillow she had liberated from him at some point, moved her lips with her eyes turned steadfastly toward the ceiling. “Not about the fake Lotus, though. Just about their objective. Probably had nothing to do with getting in the way of our Enemy hunting, or with hunting me, neither. Their aim was probably...to watch.”

“W-watch...? You mean...observe?”

“Zactly. More precisely, assess the battle power...of the main power of Prominence, and of me, Scarlet Rain...” Niko’s face—the second Red King’s face—was the most severe he’d seen it since she’d appeared in the elevator lobby that day.

Haruyuki swallowed hard and then confirmed in a hushed voice, “B-but, Niko, they said the black avatar in question dived into the earth and disappeared before the fight began...”

“Yeah. They disappeared, but they prob’ly didn’t go anywhere. They were watching us fight that Enemy from somewhere nearby. Dammit! If I’d realized that right at the start, I wouldn’t have used it...”

“Used it...? Wh-what?”

“My Enhanced Armament...The power of Invincible I’ve kept hidden so far.”

When he understood the meaning of those words, Haruyuki couldn’t stop himself from shivering. The origin of the nickname Immobile Fortress for the second Red King came, of course, from her massive figure when the many containers of weapons were fully deployed. This aggregate, given the name Invincible, was a collection of Enhanced Armament Niko had obtained gradually each time she leveled up, assessed to currently be the greatest long-distance firepower in the Accelerated World. Haruyuki had also fought against or alongside Rain in Fortress mode any number of times, so he himself had tasted her overwhelming power to an almost unpleasant degree.

But from what she was saying now, that full armament deployment was not Rain’s total power. She meant there was still something beyond that.

“Hidden...Power...What?” Haruyuki asked, unconsciously leaning forward.

“Like I’d tell you, idiot,” Niko replied, naturally, but then continued with the faintest of smiles bleeding through. “That’s what I wanna say, but it’s got a little to do with you, too, so...Look, six months ago with the armor thing, you, me, Lotus, and the professor went to Ikebukuro and got caught in that ambush by the banana dude, right? That time, it was all fine that I called my Enhanced Armament, but that yellow guy was sticking to me, making me look bad.”

“B-but we didn’t have any other choice. With that many people, I mean, what were we—?”

“You know this world’s a little bit rougher than that! Can’t just say you didn’t have a choice and walk away! ...So I went up the mountain and did a little more training. Learning from you, right...?”

“Training? Wh-what kind...?”

“Hints over! Anyway, yesterday, I used a secret trick to get my comrades away from that hella massive Legend-class Enemy, and they saw it. Worst case, they even recorded it.” She closed her mouth there and rolled over to face Haruyuki directly. “That’s all I got. So now you’ll tell me your story. About the true identity of that fake, shadowy Lotus.”

“...Right, got it. At best, this is a guess, but...” Haruyuki moved to cancel his formal seating mode, but his legs were already asleep, and he just fell over. He thought about trying to get up one more time, but since Niko didn’t seem to particularly care, he stayed on his side on the bed, took a deep breath, and said it:

“The name of the black duel avatar you saw is Black Vise. He calls himself the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, the group distributing the ISS kits in the Accelerated World.”

“...Black Vise...,” Niko repeated quietly, and Haruyuki stared intently at her face.

He had his reasons for keeping Vise's name from Niko and Pard up to that point. He didn't want to...and he was scared. That they would think that layered avatar with the same "black" color name had even the slightest relationship with his beloved Black King.

"Niko." Unable to stand the silence, Haruyuki opened his mouth again. "Do you know if a number of avatars have had the same color-name in Brain Burst...?"

"...Far as I know, never been any with the same color crown, at least. Crow, you see this Black Vise's name on his health gauge or the matching list?"

"Uh, um..." He went back through the encounters he'd had up to that point in the back of his mind before shaking his head in small increments. "I didn't. I've basically only run into Vise in the Unlimited Neutral Field. The one exception was the Hermes' Cord race, but when he showed up that time, he disappeared again right away, so his gauge didn't show up. None of us in Negabu have seen Vise's name in a system display."

"Hmm, right. So then, as one possibility, the name Black Vise could just be what he calls himself rather than his real avatar name."

"Whaaat?! You mean...he just went and took 'black,' a pure color for his name?!"

"If that's true, it's more than just naming himself. It's on the level of taking a title."

Tch! Niko clicked her tongue lightly before she turned her sharp gaze past Haruyuki's bulk. Following her eyes, he took in the complicated shadows the pale light of the night coming in through the window cast upon the built-in bookshelf. He brought his gaze back and started to explain again.

“...Black Vise can freely change the shape of the thin panels of his body and has the ability to create shadow images of other avatars. I was almost fooled by him when he took on the shape of Kuroyukihime. And he also has the ability to sink into any shadow in a stage and travel freely within it. So what you guys saw, this avatar jumping from the back of the Enemy and piercing the earth—”

“Wasn’t him opening up a big hole in the stage, but just sinking into the shadow. That it?”

“Yeah. So I think it’s plenty possible for him to have moved through the shadows and observed your battle from up close. On top of that, with the power of his brain implant chip, he can voluntarily decelerate his perceptions. So I think he was waiting to ambush you guys in the Unlimited Neutral Field.”

“Is that...right. So it was that...Acceleration Research Society.” Niko nodded, and the tension gradually drained from her body. She flopped over onto her back, and after a few seconds, she started to speak in a murmur. “...So the color crown stuff from before. I...I’ve thought about this a whole bunch of times, y’know. Like, if there’s not some kind of item that can change your color.”

“Ch-change your...color...?”

“It’s not like I’m bored of long-distance attacks, so I wanna be blue, or I wanna be yellow ’cos I wanna give support or anything. It’s just...like, if my color was just a little more concentrated, y’know. From Scarlet...to pure Red.”

“N-Niko...?” Haruyuki was so stunned, all he could do was say her name.

The color given to a duel avatar was not randomly decided by the system. The BB program pulled up a deep image of yourself and represented that as a single color. Thus, the color name was, in a certain sense, equivalent to a real name for a Burst Linker.

And Niko had basically just said she rejected the color of her own heart.

Now she curled up on the bed and hung her head. Her lips trembled, and then an even fainter voice spilled out from them. "...Six months ago, to liberate the Armor of Catastrophe, the Yellow King called me out and tried to banish me from the Accelerated World using the level nine sudden-death rule. What do you think his reason, his motive was...?"

"That's— So that he can get to level ten himself, of course..."

"Prob'ly not. No matter what he says, in his heart, he doesn't want to go near level ten. He was just hunting me because I'm an eyesore. That's all."

"But...Prominence and the Yellow Legion, CCC, are in the west and east of Tokyo. You guys don't even have any adjacent territory."

"What's in his way is not Promi, but me personally. Radio—he can't stand it. That I—not Red, but Scarlet—would call myself a King of Pure Color. And probably, the other kings more or less think so, too."

"Th-that's—" Haruyuki rose up slightly and earnestly shook his head. "Kuroyukihime would never, ever—"

"Yeah, Lotus's the exception." Niko smiled faintly, wryly, and touched the fingertips of her left hand to Haruyuki's chest as if to reassure him. "I mean, she tried to hunt the whole lot of 'em, so. She's amazing. Really something..."

On the verge of disappearing, this voice shuddered violently. She pressed her small hand gently against Haruyuki's chest and gripped the T-shirt he wore instead of pajamas.

"...Me taking the position from my predecessor to become the

head of Promi was half me yanking myself up. But I don't regret it. The Legion's only got good kids in it, and thanks to Promi, I met Pard. So I...I want to protect Promi, protect Nerima area. But...But..." Here, Niko cut herself off and slid across the sheets to press her forehead firmly against Haruyuki's chest. "...Even I know it already. I-I'm weak!"

This voice, so painfully squeezed out, shot through Haruyuki's heart. He desperately reached out a hand and wrapped it around Niko's slender shoulder. "Th-that's not true. You're so strong, Niko. If you weren't, you'd never have made it to level nine..."

"I made it, which is why I know. If I seriously went one-on-one with them—not just the originators Knight and Grandé, but even Thorn or Radio or Lotus, I—I couldn't win." Niko lifted her face and turned damp eyes on Haruyuki before continuing with a look that smiled through the tears.

"...I'll tell you something. When the Armor of Catastrophe took over Cherry six months ago, I used some forceful means to crack you in the real and get into the house. To have you catch the Armor with your flight ability...But it wasn't just that. I—I was freaked out to the bottom of my heart at the re-formed Black Legion, at the Black King coming back to the Accelerated World. I figured if she was gonna attack, the first place she'd go was Nerima. And if the Black King came after me herself, there was no way I could win. So. Crack Silver Crow in the real when you were still low-level. Try to make it so she can't attack, get some insurance. That's the cowardly, cheap way I was thinking."

From her wide-open eyes, a fat tear finally spilled out. Even so, the self-deprecating smile remained on her lips, and Niko added in a thin voice, "And then...And then, so, like. You and Lotus, you're both good kids. You actually listened to me, let me stay over here. You ate with me, played video games with me, slept beside me. I was super-happy, relieved. But I've been lying to you and Lotus ever since that day. Putting on a show of being strong, talking like we were equal. But the truth is, I'm not a pure

color, I'm a fake red. I'm just the same as he is, giving myself the title of king!"

"N-no, you're wrong. You're totally wrong!!" Haruyuki shouted as he wrapped his other hand around her slender back and pulled her to him. "Niko, you're not a fake anything! You're strong and braver than anyone! You're an amazing leader for your Legion! I mean, Blaze and them that we met in the Territories today, they all had total faith in you; they adored you. There's no way a fake could inspire that."

"But I, like, I can't protect them!! I couldn't even protect Cherry, my own and only parent!!" Niko gave a blood-curdling shriek, and she pressed her face into Haruyuki's chest again. The small fists clutching his T-shirt were clenched so tightly that they threatened to crush themselves. "...I feel it. Something's about to happen in the Accelerated World. Something bigger than the ISS kits, bigger than the appearance of Metatron. I mean, the mutual nonaggression treaty between the six major Legions probably won't last forever. If...Radio and the other Kings seriously tried to crush me and Promi again..."

"Even still...Even still, you wouldn't lose! Isn't that why you've worked so hard to get an even greater power than your Invincible Fortress Mode?!"

"If level nines seriously tried to kill one another...at the end of the day, all the rules go out the window. It would turn into an Incarnate free-for-all. You know it too. I can't use an attack-type Incarnate technique. What produced my duel avatar is fear. I wrap myself up in a shell of weapons, like a hedgehog, and desperately try to get my distance from the outside world. That's my true nature. No matter how I enhance my range or my ability to flee with Incarnate, it's— I totally can't beat their destructive Incarnate with that."

Niko's tone gradually weakened as she reached the end of the sentence. The tension ran out of her left hand, and she let it flop

down onto the sheet. She clasped her knees to her chest and curled up into a ball as if trying to withstand a sudden chill.

Although he wanted more than anything to say whatever it took to cheer her, Haruyuki's mouth was too stiff to move. Niko had indeed told Haruyuki and Takumu that the only Incarnate techniques she could use belonged to the range and movement expansion categories; she could never learn attack or defense expansion techniques. And in fact, Haruyuki was the same. Of the Incarnate techniques he had currently obtained, Laser Sword and Laser Lance were range expansion and Light Speed was movement expansion; he couldn't use a single technique to enhance his attack or defensive abilities.

Despite this—Haruyuki took a deep breath and said, "...Then I'll protect you." The slender back under the palm of his right hand trembled slightly. "If you get into a jam, I'll come flying. Anytime. And I'll knock whoever it is flying with a destructive Incarnate that'd make an originator shake."



“...Can you use somethin’ like that?” Niko asked, her voice so faint that if they hadn’t been pressed up against each other, he couldn’t have heard it. But even so, it had just a little of her normal swagger back.

“Nobody can beat me when it comes to negative power! A giga terrorist technique that’ll massively blow up an entire duel stage, not to mention a king, to force the whole thing to an end. Well, I’m going to develop it, anyway...”

“So, like, you’re prob’ly gonna drag me into that, too,” Niko muttered, slowly relaxing her curled-up body and lifting her face. Her eyes were red, and there were more than a few droplets of water resting on her eyelashes, but there was a faint smile on her lips, too. She raised a hand and pinched Haruyuki’s cheek lightly. “...You really are a simple one, huh? What if I was fake crying, and it was all a plan to get you to switch sides to Promi?”

The instant she said that, grinning, a silver light tumbled from her eyes. There was no way these droplets, as beautiful as gemstones, were fake tears.

However, she only showed him her crying face, which made her look her actual age, for an instant. Releasing his cheek, Niko closed the fifteen-or-so-centimeter gap between them to zero without a moment’s hesitation. The tips of the toes of her bare feet touched Haruyuki’s legs, and her smooth forehead was pressed against his left cheek.

“Huh? Uh, um, uhhh.” Although this wasn’t the first time they’d slept in this bed, they’d never been in close contact like this, so Haruyuki belatedly raised a tense voice in alarm. But before he could say anything else or move, he heard, “...Thanks.”

The voice came to him with the movement of her lips and sank into his insides. His head suddenly grew quiet, his rising heart rate calmed back down, and finally a strange tranquility en-

veloped Haruyuki. “Y-yeah,” he responded, not sure himself what he meant by that, and he brought his right hand to her unbound hair in an unconscious movement, stroking it gently.

Niko relaxed even more, and murmured in the most natural voice, “I can’t even tell this stuff to Pard. Sorry for barfing all this up on you.”

“It’s okay. If you just need someone to talk to, I’m here anytime. Oh, of course, when I said I’d protect you, I was serious, though.”

“Heh-heh, I’m counting on you. For serious,” she replied, laughter mixed into her voice, and then Niko looked up at Haruyuki for just a moment before quickly bringing her face back down. “As a thank-you for listening to all that, I’ll tell you a little thing while we’re at it.”

“Huh? ...What?” He cocked his head slightly to one side, and unexpected words came back to him.

“The reason why me and Pard and the girls in Negabu look out for you.”

“S-sorry?” He blinked rapidly in confusion, but this was actually a somewhat—no, fairly—interesting topic. Because it was true that, each time the troop of girls in the Legion interacted with him in a favorable manner, somewhere in his heart, he wondered, *Why someone like me?*

But the words Niko uttered after a pause were also entirely unexpected. “Maybe you won’t get it if I just tell you in words, but... us F-type Neurolinkers are always afraid when we’re in the real world—just a little, but still. A different type of fear from what I was talking about before.”

“A...fraid? Of what?”

“Yeah, right. Other people. Or more specifically, real-world M-types, I guess.”

“E-em type? You mean, guys?”

“Yeah. When we’re duel avatars in the Accelerated World, we’re protected by hard armor. F-types and M-types all have enough power to fight as equals. But once the duel’s over and we return to the real world, that power disappears. The more hours you spend as a Burst Linker, the more you end up feeling how weak and helpless your real body is.”

“...Helpless...real body...” It was just as she’d said before: This was indeed something Haruyuki had a hard time understanding intuitively. Naturally, when he was in the real world, he dreamed of being able to fly the way Silver Crow did. He might have even wished he were as strong as Crow. But that wasn’t a serious thing; it was a simple fantasy.

No. That’s not right. That day when he had accelerated for the first time in his life, he had wanted it so, so badly.

After learning about the miraculous power of the BB program from Kuroyukihime in the lounge of Umesato Junior High, the first thing Haruyuki had asked about was whether he could win in a fight if he used Brain Burst. At the time, he had desperately wanted to beat down the boy who was bullying him so cruelly. He had asked this precisely because he was painfully aware of how helpless the real him was.

If Kuroyukihime hadn’t quickly ejected those delinquents, Haruyuki might want that even now. To be able to fight like Crow in reality, too. And he might have lived in fear because of the fact that he couldn’t.

Once he had thought things through that far, Haruyuki finally saw the current situation in a new light. He swallowed hard. “Uh...So, Niko, right now. You have that fear of me, too...?” he

asked timidly.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to say.” Fortunately, Niko didn’t pull any “Big brother, you’re scary”—type mode changes that were so bad for his heart; in fact, she patted his cheek. “...You basically don’t make me afraid at all. And I think it’s prob’ly like that for Pard and Lotus and Rake and Maiden, too. And this, it’s pretty incredible, y’know? I mean, at school, just ending up alone with a boy for some weird reason is enough to make me nervous. Even though I know in my head, he’s not gonna do anything to me, it’s still no good.”

“...You’re scared even with the social cameras...?”

“Yeah. You can’t not feel it. The fact that I’m not protected by armor, that I don’t have special attack or Enhanced Armament or anything at all—that fear just gets bigger the more time you spend in the Accelerated World. At any rate, maybe you just always end up having fear wrapped around you when you’re in the real world.”

“Th-that’s...” Haruyuki earnestly fumbled to say something that would ease Niko’s fear, even if just by a little. But the “Niko, you’re strong” that he’d repeated over and over before wasn’t encouraging or meaningful in this context. It was precisely because she had gained such impossible power in the Accelerated World that she felt this unease in the real.

Haruyuki opened and closed his mouth over and over again until Niko, watching, started giggling happily for some reason. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything. I told you before, you’re the only one I’m not afraid of. And it’s not just that. When I’m with you—when I’m with *Haruyuki*, the fear built up inside me just gets smaller. When I stick to you, I feel safe. The frozen negative Incarnate...it’s like it gets purified into a warm light...”

“.....Um...” Haruyuki no longer had the slightest clue about how he should react.

“I’m sure the old hands of Negabu gotta be feeling the same way.” Niko leaned in as if she were entrusting her whole body to him. “At the curry party the other day, I mean, their faces...Their guards were completely down, they were all happily laughing. I mean, come on.”

“...W-were they...?” He had been totally unaware of this, and he could only recall moments of harsh severity with Kuroyukihime and Fuko, so he cocked his head to one side. After thinking about what Niko had said for a while, he furrowed his brow. “Um. So then, Niko, does that mean from the look of me, I’m the absolutely safe and totally harmless character?”

In that case, what did that really say about him as a real M-type? He had just started to have uncharacteristic thoughts like this when Niko stretched out both hands and clapped his face between them.

He expected her to yank his cheeks out to either side as hard as she could, like always, but Niko kept her hands as they were and smiled peacefully. “That’s not it. I’m talking about what’s inside this round head. Your mind. It’s ’cos we know you’re always thinking of us for real with everything you got that we feel safe with you. I mean, I’ve even thought this— Someday, I gotta thank you properly. That idea.”

“Th-that’s—I mean, I’m not actually doing anything.”

“It’s fine. As long as you stay close, that’s enough. So don’t go changing on me, ’kay? Even after you go up levels and get to be a high ranker, you just stay the way you are. And...like, if I someday —” She cut herself off there and moved the hands on Haruyuki’s cheeks down to his neck. Then she brought her face closer and touched it to him like she was trying to listen to his heartbeat before she closed her eyes, a smile still upon her face.

When we wake up tomorrow morning, Niko will probably be the same old Niko. She’ll be back to the absolute power of the

Red King, not showing me the slightest weakness, much less tears. But I won't forget. Niko's the Red King, but at the same time, she's a girl two years younger than me. And I promised to protect that Niko.

Haruyuki carved this into his heart as he peacefully sank over the edge into the rising waterline of sleep. When he closed his eyes, he heard a faint breathing in his ear. As he listened to it, his thoughts started to expand, and immediately before they faded to black, the source of the sound shifted a little, and he felt like something was touching his cheek. But Haruyuki didn't know whether that was a dream or not.

7

Haruyuki bathed in the refreshing morning light and the faint breeze, breathing it in. It was as though the rainy season had ended without waiting for the announcement from the meteorological agency.

Right outside his condo building was the sidewalk of Kannana Street. This was the time of day when, normally, the wave of people heading toward Koenji Station would have been unbroken, but today, it was deserted. Because it was Sunday, of course.

Instead, beside Haruyuki was a redheaded girl who appeared to be only yet half-awake. He watched her as she yawned spectacularly, charmed, and then was suddenly faced with her glare.

“Don’t just go starin’ at a lady yawning.”

“I-I’m sorry—”

See! Same old Red King! Haruyuki tucked his head back into himself.

“So then hand it over already.” Niko thrust out her right hand.

“H-huh?! A yawn-viewing fee?!”

“Nooooooooot that! Obviously, the invite pass for your school festival!”

“Oh! R-right— Wh-whaaaaat?! You’re coming?!”

“I said that first thing yesterday! The reason I came to your place at all was one-third to apologize for the Territories, one

third to ask about the attempted EK...”

“...So the last third was the school festival—?”

“Yes! C’mon, hurry up! Two passes!” Niko dexterously waggled the first two fingers of her thrust-out hand.

“Huh?” Haruyuki was forced to blink rapidly once more.
“Two? You and who else?”

As if on cue, in the opposite lane of Kannana, an actually cool motor sound passed by, drawing a line between itself and the energy-saving EVs. He reflexively turned his gaze that way and saw a familiar deep red. The source of the sound disappeared from his field of view for a moment but then made a high-speed U-turn at the light just ahead and came north in the lane on this side of the road.

Vrrrrruun. Stopping in front of Haruyuki and Niko, regenerative brake echoing through the air, was a large electric motorcycle Haruyuki had ridden before. The rider in a sports bike jacket and jeans was, of course, the deputy of the Red Legion, Blood Leopard.

Pard popped up the visor of her helmet with her left hand and waved her fingers at Haruyuki and Niko. “Hi.”

“G-good morning.”

“Morning, Pard. Sorry, I shoulda waited for you on the other side.”

“NP. It’s this country’s fault for still driving on the left.” After casually criticizing the system, Pard extended a hand to Haruyuki. But she didn’t mean for him to jump on the back, of course.

Each student was given three invitations for the Umesato Ju-

nior High festival. Haruyuki had already given one to Rin Kusakabe, but he still had the others, since he had no one to give them to. He had actually thought about inviting Niko and Pard, but then he'd heard about the attack on the festival at a school in Shimokitazawa in Setagaya Ward—naturally, in the Burst Linker sense—and he had put off making any decision until the very day was upon them.

But when he thought about it, the leader of the attack group, Magenta Scissor, had announced she would invade the east from Setagaya Area No. 2, and Umesato Junior High, being due north, was basically in a totally different direction. The possibility she'd be targeting the school festival that day was vanishingly small.

The remaining issue was what the reaction of the other Nega Nebulus members would be when they found out that, in addition to Rin, he had invited Niko and Pard. But it was possible they would be delighted at the unexpected faces visiting the school, wasn't it?

No, no, thinking about it, he couldn't say it was a certainty that the school festival would end with all of them meeting each other in the real. After all, Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Takumu would have their hands full with the booths and presentations of their own groups.

The moment his wandering thoughts reached this place, Haruyuki nodded with a somewhat stiff smile and ran his fingers across his virtual desktop.

Since, legally, they couldn't all three of them ride, no matter how big the motorcycle was, they decided to meet up again at the festival once it started, and Haruyuki went to school on foot.

Normally, there would still be a slight sleepiness left in the core of his head, but that day, his head was clear because he had gotten up early to tweak the class display files, and that early rising was topped off by the excitement of the festival itself. He

walked slightly faster than usual, along a sidewalk that felt different from the usual weekday style, and once he crossed Oume Highway and proceeded a little farther, the front gates of his destination, Umesato Junior High, came into view.

The festival gates rose up immediately inside the pillars of the main gate, the painstaking work of the group that made them, composed mostly of the school festival committee. The theme that year was “time,” and to go along with that, the design took on a motif of an analogue clock face. Made out of gold synthetic paper, it looked spectacular, but the team that made it was probably breathing a sigh of relief that it was sunny that day.

As he approached the front gates, several groups of students were waiting for their turn to have memorial photos taken. Normally, saving screenshots of your field of view on school grounds was prohibited (naturally, Kuroyukihime managed to be exempt), but on that day, it was allowed in certain areas. Haruyuki walked along, carefully watching for the right moment to quickly slip through once the group of boys lined up inside the gate was done taking their pictures.

“Oh! Arita! You get in here, too!” someone shouted, and he very nearly tripped and fell.

When he looked, he saw a tall boy with a shaved head waving his right hand. It was a member of the basketball team from his class named Ishio. Around him were also the sporty guys from eighth-grade class C, and inwardly, Haruyuki screeched. But over these last few months, Haruyuki had gained the mental strength to not simply run away right then and there...he thought. Probably.

Bracing himself, Haruyuki shouted “S-sure!” as he ran toward the gate. Ishio and the others had apparently wholeheartedly embraced the festival feel at that early hour, and when Haruyuki joined their ranks, they shouted, “Yay!” and flashed peace signs. Somehow managing to produce a smile and the same pose,

Haruyuki traded places with the picture taker and took a picture of his classmates, and then they exchanged images.

“The basketball team’s doing a free-throw game. Come by later!” Ishio shouted.

“I’ll be there!” Haruyuki replied, then he broke away. As he walked toward the entrance, he let out a long sigh.

His first task was to launch and do the final check of the class exhibit program in his classroom. The school festival started at nine thirty, so he’d go and meet Niko and Pard at the front gates then. Rin Kusakabe was supposed to arrive at the school by ten, so they’d meet up with her, and then he’d take them to the crepe booth that Chi Yuri’s girls’ track-and-field team was running.

Here, Haruyuki finally realized that with this timetable, Rin and Niko and Pard would inevitably have their first meeting in the real. Naturally, he would have to introduce the two sides, but what exactly was he supposed to say? If he explained with something like “This is Ash Roller from GW. And these are Scarlet Rain and Blood Leopard from Promi,” the air would instantly freeze. And it wouldn’t stop at that. Most definitely not.

That said, it definitely wouldn’t fly for him to show one of them around and leave the others to their own devices. The only thing for him to do was come up with some way of introducing them so that each didn’t realize the other was a Burst Linker.

“...So then I guess all I can say is we’re friends. Saying ‘gaming friends’ might even be too risky. So then curry friends. No, no...” He considered the problem intently as he changed his shoes and started to walk down the hallway toward the first school building, and then someone tapped his back lightly from behind.

“What are you so troubled about on the day of the school festival, Haruyuki?”

“Um, it’s just I handed out invitations without actually thinking ahead.”

“Oh? To whom?”

“Right, one to— Wait, waaah?!” He visually confirmed the figure of the student council vice president walking alongside him and jumped slightly before quickly bowing his head. “G-good morning, Kuroyukihime!”

“Mmm, morning. So then who did you invite to the festival, I wonder?” Kuroyukihime posed the question once more, grinning.

“Uh, um...,” Haruyuki replied, a fairly stiff smile spreading across his face. “I-I-I’ll introduce you later! A-a-anyway! Have you finished getting ready with the student council?”

“Mmm. Well, I suppose. We’ll be revealing our program at two, using the entire school grounds, so do come see it if you can. With your mysterious friends.”

“Y-yeah, we’ll definitely be there.” Haruyuki nodded, and it seemed like Kuroyukihime would be kind enough to put the matter of the invitations on hold for now.

She gave his back a little push to change directions before stopping in a corner of the hallway and then cleared her throat lightly. “I was going to notify the Legion members with a mail or something later,” she said in a slightly hushed voice. “But in the event that we’re attacked today by a new Burst Linker or an ISS kit user, don’t go out of your way to fight. All of us will be in the Gallery, so we can identify the enemy position from the guide cursor and crack them in the real. Naturally, if you’re in the Gallery, make sure you don’t forget to check the guide cursor.”

“Right, I understand. But will there be an attack?”

“Mmm. I think the probability is vanishingly small, but...Actu-

ally, at the festival last year and the year before, not only was there no attack, there wasn't even anyone slipping into the local net. But the rumor is that yesterday..." Here, she closed her mouth briefly and leaned up against the hallway wall, turning her sharp eyes to the south—toward Setagaya.

They were down to one hour before the curtain went up on the school festival, and the air in the school was filled with an excitement that was a jumble of expectation and nervous tension. Alongside groups running around with frenzied looks on their faces, apparently still getting ready, fully finished, smiling students brought their heads together and peered at holowindows, planning out what they would see first.

As for Haruyuki, he had spent the whole day of the festival the previous year on tenterhooks, trying not to run into his bullies, so he naturally intended to enjoy it to the fullest this year. But Kuroyukihime's words now concerned him, and his body stiffened up as he asked in reply, "Y-you can't mean...an attack on a school near Shimokitazawa again yesterday?"

"No, according to my investigation, there were no schools holding their festivals yesterday. But it appears to be a fact that Magenta Scissor and her subordinates appeared frequently in the area. I can't imagine they'd invade the territory of Great Wall for no reason."

"So then it might be reconnaissance for their next attack?"

"That's possible, but schools with their festivals at this time of year are fairly rare."

"Normally, it's in September or October, after all. I wonder why Umesato's is in June?"

"That's a mystery with a long history of being dissected at our fine school. One theory has it that the character for 'ume' is the same as the one in the word for 'rainy season,' but if that were the

case, then that would mean they set the festival for the time of year with the most rainy days, which is utterly absurd. But on the other hand, although the festival is in June, the weather's strangely sunny, so that's another fairly illogical thing—though that's not the point.”

She cleared her throat and got back on track before bringing her beautiful face close to Haruyuki's. “Basically, what I'm trying to say is that, if there are very few schools holding their festivals at this time of year, then we must consider the possibility at least that Magenta and her group will bring their campaign to Umesato. And it appears that invitations were traded on the Net, albeit only a few.”

“What? But can't they only be sent through an ad hoc connection?”

“You can get around a limit like that pretty easily. Every year, I write an opinion letter that we should introduce resident net authentication and restrict invitations to family and relatives of students, but every time, it's rejected by the administration. Well, this year at least, thanks to the loose rules, we were able to invite Fuko, Utai, and Akira, so I suppose that's good.”

“Oh, good! You invited Master and the others!”

“Hmm? That's an excessively happy look on your face, isn't it? I suppose I should ask now just who you invited,” Kuroyukihime said with a hard look in her eyes, so this time it was Haruyuki clearing his throat and getting the conversation back on track.

“Uh, um, at any rate, we should be careful of attacks, right! It might be better to register tag teams for all the Legion members in advance, huh? So I'll be with y—”

“Me and Fuko, Akira and Utai should be good. We'll have Takumu team up with Chiyuri, so you team up with one of the friends you invited.”

“R-right, understood.” He bobbed his head.

“Oh-ho.” Kuroyukihime’s gaze was icy. “So you *did* invite a Burst Linker, and a student from another school at that. I’m looking forward to being introduced to them.”

“Nngh! Oh, that, it’s—” Easily caught in the leading question, Haruyuki felt a cold sweat pop up all over when he was saved by the nine o’clock bell. “Oh! I—I—I have to go do the final check for the class exhibit! S-s-s-so then, I’ll be in contact with you later, Kuroyukihime!”

“That you’re able to run away like that now, you’ve grown, hmm?” Kuroyukihime evaluated him even more coolly, and then smiled with wry exasperation. “Then I’ll see you later. I’ll definitely stop by and see the exhibit in grade-eight class C.”

“I-it’s nothing amazing, but I’ll be waiting for you! All right, then!” Turning around after a final bow, Haruyuki dashed up to the second floor.

The hallway in front of his classroom was decorated with plastic garlands and synthetic paper tape, divorced from its everyday feel. Grade-eight class A was doing the school festival staple of the haunted house, while class B was handling the café, so it seemed like they’d have a lot of visitors with just that.

In contrast, Haruyuki’s class C was doing an exhibition entitled “Koenji Thirty Years Ago,” and the content and decorations were the very definition of subdued. Because there were only seven people left to take charge of the class exhibit, any kind of major plan had been impossible right from the get-go; Haruyuki felt sorry for the guests who would come to see such an unenthusiastic offering.

Thus, after getting the approval of the other members of the group, Haruyuki had added a few tricks to the exhibit. He hurried to the classroom and found that the other six had already gath-

ered there, and he was about to shrink apologetically into himself when a voice came flying his way:

“Arita, you’re laaaate!” The shouter was Ikuzawa, the class C representative. She belonged to the Calligraphy Club, but she had also volunteered to help with the class exhibit, given how few people were on that team. She was a very serious, good person.

And now she shook her head, hair tied off to one side, and continued briskly, “You took the exhibit file home to make some adjustments, so you’re the only one who can launch it, you know! If we don’t hurry and check the operation, we won’t be in time for the start of the festival, now, will we?!”

“S-sor—” Haruyuki started to apologize at full power when someone patted his shoulder lightly. It was Oka, a boy with long hair bleached right up to the edge of school regulations, who proudly named himself a member of the Go Home Club.

“C’mon, Ikuzawa. I mean, he is late, but by thirty seconds. Arita’s been busy, too, y’know. I went by the shoe lockers before, an’ there he was with the student council vice pres—”

“Ah! L-let’s hurry and check the exhibit! Yes, let’s do that! I’ll get it ready right now!” Haruyuki interjected with panic, and then he looked around the classroom. All the desks and chairs had been carried out, and in their place, a path in the shape of a C had been laid out with large panels. The seven team members were near the entrance of the pathway.

Having confirmed all this, Haruyuki reached a hand out to his virtual desktop. He first uploaded to the local school net the file he had just finished working on at seven that morning. He then ran the AR display program, and a dialogue box popped up in his field of view, asking him if he wanted to accept the connection.

The other six members of the group moved their fingers at the same time as Haruyuki to push the YES button. There was a

whooshing sound effect, and then the look of the entire classroom was overwritten.

The plastic tiles of the floor became gray asphalt road, the ceiling a bright and clear sunny sky. The walls to the east and west disappeared and, along with the windows on the south side, were transformed into a low guardrail. On the other side of that, a wide road was depicted, and ancient buildings were generated in the distance.

“Wh-whoa?!” Oka cried out, and ran over to the guardrail.

“Oh, don’t!” Haruyuki hurriedly called out. “That’s really just the wall!”

He had made a warning window above the guardrail that said THERE IS A WALL HERE to keep people from colliding with it, but Oka pushed it aside like it was in the way, and cried out with delight, “Whoa! Cars’re driving! And they’re basically all gasoline cars. Whoa! Isn’t that a 35 GT-R?! Sounds so cool!!”

When Haruyuki yanked earnestly at Oka’s shirt, since he was still on the verge of colliding with an invisible wall, he heard the voice of the class rep Ikuzawa behind him.

“I get it! You mapped 3-D graphics onto the walls and the floor.”

“Y-yeah. If we’re gonna show old photos, I figured the background should be like that, too.”

“So then this is scenery from the 2010s?”

“It’s a mix from around 2010, yeah. I made it by putting all the photos from the time you all collected into three-dimensional software. The car noises are real data— Oh! You can also look at the photos, of course.”

He let go of Oka and turned back toward the wall opposite the

guardrail. The large panels were also overwritten, changing into a wall of weathered brick. When he touched the surface and operated the window, countless photos appeared in poster form—scenes from the Koenji neighborhood from thirty years ago that the members of the group had collected from their own homes or from acquaintances.

Their initial plan had simply been to share an exhibition of these photos with AR display on the white panel surface, but that was a little dull, and Haruyuki had come up with the idea of overwriting the entire classroom. But when he actually executed the idea, it was somehow...

“...It’s like the photos are the bit player and the background’s the star now.” Ikuzawa put into words exactly what he was feeling.

“S-sorry for just doing this.” Haruyuki reflexively shrank into himself. “If it’s in the way of the photos, I can put the background back the way it was...”

“What’re you talking about? This is super-good!” It was Oka who cheered now, still clinging to the guardrail. “I’ve driven old cars in full-dive games, but seeing them driving along Oume Highway, it’s so real! Cool! Hey, Arita, that’s an AE 86, isn’t it?!”

“Huh...? Which one?”

“The first one, obviously! I’ve never seen the actual thing, and I mean, I know this isn’t real, either, but you could drive it!”

“G-got it. I’ll take a look in the data. But, before that, Ikuzawa —” He turned back with the thought that he should talk to her, but the class rep was no longer there. Together with the other members of the group, she had moved over to the guardrail on the south wall and was looking up at the town they could “see” on the other side of the road.

He walked up alongside them and was timidly moving to start a conversation when Ikuzawa raised her left hand and pointed to the southeast. “Can you see it? That twelve-story condo over there?”

“Huh?” He turned his eyes in that direction and saw an old mixed-use building sticking its head up over the rest of the buildings, which were overall slightly lower than they were currently. “Y-yeah. I can’t see the bottom, so I don’t know how many floors there are, though...”

“It’s a twelve-story building. I lived on the tenth floor before. We moved a long time ago, though, and they built a new condo there.”

“Wow, you did?” Frozen in place, he could do nothing more than offer this reply.

Ikuzawa turned her whole body toward Haruyuki. “Thanks, Arita. I used the lack of people as an excuse and figured that if we were going to do something for the class, then this’d probably do. But like this, I just know visitors are going to be delighted.”

“Oh...S-so then it’s okay to use it like this?”

“Of course. Right, guys?” Ikuzawa asked everyone, and the other members of the team showed their agreement verbally. Oka alone remained pressed to the guardrail, crying out in delight each time an old sports car passed with an explosive noise.

The tension drained out of Haruyuki’s shoulders, and with a “*Phew*,” he turned toward Ikuzawa and the others and bowed his head.

The opening time of nine thirty approached, and Haruyuki stepped briskly out into the hallway to return to the front gates. He finally had to tackle the difficult task of bringing together Niko and Pard with Rin Kusakabe, but a different thought was in

his head.

What if he were a female Burst Linker? Even though he felt like Oka was a pretty good guy, when he'd approached him, with his slightly bad-boy air and his love of old cars, would he have been afraid?

Haruyuki was thinking about this thanks to, of course, Niko's confession the night before: the idea that F-type Burst Linkers who spent a long time in the Accelerated World were always dogged by a sense of helplessness and, because of that, a very real fear when they returned to the real world.

It wasn't an idea he couldn't relate to. Before, Kuroyukihime had had a bristliness to her that kept people from coming over to her, even when she was in the school lounge or the VR space on the local net. Maybe the reason for that was a built-up fear due to sealing away her duel avatar for a long time.

Niko had said that Haruyuki melted away that fear. Of course, he was absolutely not aware he could do that. In fact, he felt like he always had his hands full with just himself, and he did nothing but fail at that, unable to pay attention to the people near him. But he could swear this at least:

I'm not going to hurt Kuroyukihime or Master or the Legion veterans or Chiyu or Taku, or Niko or Pard, and of course not Rin Kusakabe, either. No way. I'm not going to be the reason for their sadness. I'll do whatever I can to make sure everyone can have a smile on their face all the time. First and foremost, I'll make sure they have a super-good time at the festival today.

Telling himself this as he changed his shoes, Haruyuki trotted across the front yard and approached the main gates. There, he spotted the two members of Prominence, both in street clothes with a keynote of red, to one side of the golden festival gates shining in the morning sun. He raised his right hand—and then froze. Because a mere meter away from the two in red, he spotted a girl

in green coordinates.

He didn't need to see the fluffy short hair or the pouch slung across her body to know that it was Rin Kusakabe. The beloved little sister of the Burst Linker belonging to Great Wall, Ash Roller, and in a certain sense, Ash Roller himself.

Naturally, the Red Legion Promi and the Green Legion GW had the mutual nonaggression pact between them. So the girls wouldn't have a relationship of open hostility, but that was based precisely on a shared awareness of the fact that they were members of the six Great Legions. Currently, they didn't actually know that right beside them was another Burst Linker, did they? In which case, the moment they found that out, it wouldn't have been at all strange if they started to duel.

I have to avoid that somehow, at least! Like a text or some kind of message, get one of them to move away or something... The instant he had this thought, Niko and Rin, who had been looking around at the spectacle in the area, both locked onto Haruyuki at the same time.

They smiled in tandem and then raised their right hands in sync as well, turning toward Haruyuki. And when they both moved their faces at the same time, they stared for about two seconds at the person who was standing right next to them doing the same action as they were.

Right then, Haruyuki was overcome with a super-sized desire to flee, but he barely succeeded in fighting it back and braced himself as he stepped forward. Now that it had come to this, his only choice was to put the situation in order before something happened between Niko and Rin. And wasn't Kuroyukihime always saying, "Let the dogs beat a clever retreat"? Although, well, she did occasionally mean a banzai attack with the premise of dying in battle.

Aaaaaah! A powerfully cool battle cry surging up in his heart,

Haruyuki dashed over to the three girls and spoke with a broad smile. Or more precisely, he tried to speak. “S-sorry to make you wait! You’re ear—”

“Hey, Haruyuki, who’s this girl?”

“Um, Arita? Who. Might I ask. Is this?”

Showered in cross fire from Niko’s glare, infused with a deep intensity, and Rin’s eyes, watery and trembling, Haruyuki stiffened up once more.

Standing in front of him, Pard murmured with a straight face, “GL.” *Good luck.*

Now that it had come to this, all he could do was jump right into it. In line with this decisive resolution, Haruyuki introduced Niko and Rin as his “gamer friends,” just like he’d initially thought he would.

The one who reacted first, who had visited the Arita house frequently, and who knew very well that there was only one game Haruyuki was currently pouring his heart and soul into, was Niko. Turning to face Rin, she snagged the thumbs of both hands on the pockets of her cutoff jeans and jerked her chin out.



“Which is it?”

With just that, Rin also seemed to understand the true identity of her interlocutor. Or maybe the two of them had sensed something right from the start. Either way, clutching the hem of her light-green chiffon tunic, Rin replied in a tiny voice, “Um. Green. And you?”

“Red. Hey, Haruyuki, lemme ask you, just in case.”

“Y-yes.” Her glaring eyes turned on him, Haruyuki nodded without even the time to wonder at the fact that Niko was calling him by name now. “What is it?”

“She’s not the head, right?”

“H-head?” He cocked his own head to one side before finally understanding the meaning of the question as, “She’s not the head of Great Wall, i.e., the Green King, Green Grandé, right?”

“N-n-n-n-n-n-no way! Sh-sh-she’s not! Totally not!”

“Hmm. Well, fine then— Nah, it’s not fine, but we’ll say it is for the festival at least. You’ll be hearing about it from me later, though, Haruyuki.”

“...Yes, I’ll happily accept that...” It was true that introducing Burst Linkers from different Legions at a school festival and having them wait for him in the same place on top of that, forcing them to be cracked in the real, was the height of carelessness. Thinking he should apologize to all three once more, Haruyuki looked at each of them in turn before bowing his head. “I’m really sorry I didn’t think this through. If something bad happens because of this, I’ll take full responsibilit—”

But here a small hand reached out from his right and grabbed hold of the material of his shirt. When he lifted his face, Rin’s gentle smile was right in front of him. “You don’t. Have to. Apolo-

gize. I'm happy, too. To have more friends."

"Whoa! Hey! What're you doing there, Greenie?!" Niko shouted and, of course, grabbed his shirt from the left and yanked on it.

Pard, watching from a little ways off as Haruyuki moved from side to side in confusion, laughed a rare laugh.

Once the introductions were over—Niko was "Niko," Rin was "Rin," and for some reason, Pard gave her name as "Myah" after thinking about it for a second—and they had assembled into a peaceful four-person party, it was nine thirty, and the action committee chief announced, via a school-wide broadcast, that that school festival was officially open.

Cheers and applause rose up throughout the school, and once these had died down, the girls' division of the AV club began the live public broadcast, backed by some up-tempo music. The broadcast was streaming via the local net rather than through any speakers, so Haruyuki lowered the volume a bit with a control on his virtual desktop and turned back to the three girls.

"Okay then, starting over. Welcome to the Umesato Junior High school festival. I'll be showing you around today. Is there anything you'd particularly like to see first?"

"Crepes!" Niko, of course, shouted immediately.

"That's not something to see, but something to eat..."

"Shut up! I didn't have breakfast this morning, so I'm starving! You're the one who went and ran out of milk for cereal—"

"O-o-okay! Right, first stop, the track-and-field team's crepe stand!"

"I. Agree."

“Kay.”

So with that, Haruyuki first led his group toward the cafeteria on the east side of the first school building. In the large space, the long tables were all pushed up against one wall that day, and in their place were several multicolored booths. There was also a refreshment area on the grounds outside, and that was the best spot, but Chiyuri and her team had lost the lottery for spaces there.

Still, despite the fact that the festival had only just begun, the cafeteria was fairly crowded, and there were already several people waiting in line at the crepe stand his group had their eye on. When Haruyuki and his charges queued at the back of it, a girl wearing rabbit ears said, “Welcome!” and offered them a home-made menu with pictures, so he unconsciously turned serious eyes on it.

Surprisingly, they had over ten types of toppings, but the prices were all the same, so showing off his natural indecisiveness, Haruyuki set his eyes racing around the menu.

“Seriously, Haru? I know I said to come to the booth, but you didn’t have to rush over here as soon as the festival started,” he heard a voice say. Jerking his head up, he saw Chiyuri grinning with fond exasperation on the other side of the griddle, a small ladle in one hand. But just as Haruyuki anticipated, that expression vanished in about three seconds. Naturally, this was because she had noticed Haruyuki’s companions. “Ohhh, huh, hmm. I see.”

“No, it’s, that’s— It’s to build friendship between Leg... groups.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. So. Are you ready to order?” Fortunately, Chiyuri, also in rabbit ears, along with a white apron, quickly took on her professional attitude again, so Haruyuki hurried to order a chocolate banana crepe.

While Niko, Rin, and Pard chatted happily, Chiyuri fried the crepe, and then the girl who was her partner piled toppings on and handed the dish to Haruyuki, at which point he paid with the allowance charged onto his Neurolinker. Once all four of them had food, he checked to make sure there were no customers waiting and then went around to the side of the booth to ask Chiyuri in a quiet voice, “Chiyu, what time are you done here?”

“Um, at eleven, I guess.”

“Eleven? Okay then, let’s all go see the kendo team performance at eleven fifteen.”

And then his childhood friend of more than ten years glanced in the direction of Niko and the others before smiling with the sense of “no choice, I guess” and nodded.

Taking advantage of the special privilege from being first to the cafeteria, the foursome settled in at one of the round tables in the lounge and dug into their crepes. Now that he thought about it, Pard was a semi-pro pastry chef, and Niko was her apprentice, so their bar for evaluating Western-style sweets would be pretty high.

Haruyuki waited for them each to take a bite before asking timidly, “How is it?”

Pard, aka Myah, nodded with a serious look and offered the brief “GJ.” Niko just gave a thumbs-up with her left hand and continued chomping away.

Relieved that the crepes had apparently passed, Haruyuki looked at Rin to his right, who, in contrast with Niko, was bringing her simple strawberry crepe to her mouth bit by bit at a slow pace.

A little worried, Haruyuki brought his face closer and said, “Um, if you don’t like it, feel free to say so.” *I can eat it for you,*

he started to follow up, but then he would just seem like a glutton. That said, he was afraid to ask Chiyuri to remake it for her, and his mouth was frozen half-open.

“Oh! No. It’s not that. It’s. Very, very. Good,” Rin answered with her usual gentle smile, and then turned her gaze back on her crepe, more than 70 percent of it remaining, and continued regretfully, “...I actually had too much. For breakfast. I thought I’d be okay, but I guess. I’m pretty full. If you want, Arita, you can have it...”

Rin offered the crepe with downcast eyes, and he reflexively started to reach for it before falling into the nth freeze state of that morning. The crepes weren’t plated, but rather rolled up into cones, so Rin’s adorable teeth marks were cut into the golden-fried batter. He wasn’t sure whether there was a logical or moral issue with overwriting that with his own large mouth.

Perhaps sensing this conflict, Rin opened her eyes wide before saying in a vanishing voice, “Oh! I-I’m sorry. I didn’t. Think. But you wouldn’t. Want to have something half-eaten.”

“Th-that’s not it at all! I’m totally fine with it, but I just wondered if it bothered you.”

“I-it. Doesn’t bother me. No, um, not in a bad way. So...here...” Cheeks turning red, Rin proffered the crepe once more, and right before Haruyuki could accept it, Niko’s hand snaked in from the side and grabbed it.

“If you’re gonna do this little tedious dance, I’ll take it!” Niko announced with a piercing look, and all Haruyuki could do was say, “Go ahead.”

Niko snorted lightly and then annihilated the strawberry crepe in a mere three bites, gulped down some water, and then shouted as though she had just hit on the idea, “I’ll just say this now. It’s not ‘cos I’m the glutton character or anything!”

“So then which character are you?” Haruyuki sniped, enduring the sadness of having been robbed of the treat.

It was Pard who answered, rather than Niko. “The jealous character.” Face completely expressionless as always, the look in her eyes softened. “And I’m the thickheaded character.”

“Wh-what are you talking about, Pa—I mean, Myah?! And just how long are we gonna sit here anyway? Show us something already!” Niko stomped off, and Haruyuki and the others exchanged glances before going after her.

Having fortified themselves, the four of them decided to first attack the exhibitions of the seventh-grade classes on the third floor of the first school building and climbed the stairs in the middle of the hallway. All three classes were actually quite serious, without a shred of playfulness to their festival offerings, so the group took a quick look around, mentally apologizing, before heading to the second floor.

In the haunted house of class A, Niko, positioned to Haruyuki’s left, burst out laughing. Meanwhile, Rin, to his right, clung to him with teary eyes. So, unsure of how to react, Haruyuki slipped past the blackout curtain to the outside.

He couldn’t deny that class B’s cosplay café did tug at him a little, but they’d just eaten those crepes, so they passed by the café and headed for eighth-grade class C. They stopped at the doorway, and Haruyuki struggled with how to broach the fact that this was his own class—and not only that, but he was also part of the team who’d put together this exhibit.

“This is your class, yeah?” Niko said smoothly.

“Y-yeah.” He wondered how she knew. “I helped put the exhibit together, but to be honest, it’s no big deal, so don’t expect too much.”

“Goodness! Is that so?” He had heard the gentle voice before, but it was a fact that this was not one of his party members, so Haruyuki whirled around.

There, he found three people approaching from behind them. The girl in a sky-blue dress with long hair was unmistakably Sky Raker, aka Fuko Kurasaki. The girl whose hand she was holding tightly—or maybe the girl whom she had captured—wearing the uniform of the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy was Ardor Maiden, aka Utai Shinomiya. And beside the two of them, a girl in red-framed glasses stood quietly, wearing, as always, neutral clothing—this time, skinny jeans with a jersey shirt. That was Aqua Current, who had only just formally returned to the Legion the previous day...Akira Himi.

Seeing her strict but gentle parent Fuko, Rin clutched Haruyuki’s shirt with her left hand. The Red King, Niko, shook her head in exasperation at another close encounter with a foreign Legion, while Pard appeared to be staring at one of Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements, while still standing tall next to Niko.

Haruyuki was curious about Pard’s reaction, but their unbalanced group of six bewitching girls and one round boy was drawing stares from the people around them, so he bowed his head first at Fuko, with Rin still hanging from him. “Good morning! Thank you for coming, Master! And welcome to you both as well!”

“I’d go anywhere for you, of course, Corvus.” Fuko said these disturbing words with a smile and then shifted her gaze slightly. “But I had no idea Rin would be coming. To keep secrets even from me—” Cutting herself off here, Fuko’s smile faded and her brow furrowed. “Rin, you actually look a little pale.”

“Uh, um. I’m okay! I just. Ate too much with. Breakfast and crepes.” Rin’s face in profile as she answered did actually look a tiny bit too pale to be fine. But she was pale to begin with, and the extra paleness could have been the hue of the white LED lights

they were standing under.

Perhaps Fuko came to that same conclusion. “Well then, we’ll be in the way if we just stand here in such a large group. So why don’t we first go in and view Corvus’s class exhibit.”

To start at the end, the guests—first three, then six—all seemed to enjoy grade-eight class C’s “Koenji Thirty Years Ago.”

At first, just as class rep Ikuzawa had worried, 70 percent of the time they spent inside was devoted not to the star of the show, the photographs, but to viewing the 3-D graphics of the background; however, even in this, there was an unexpected joy. Rin and Pard stood alongside each other and played at naming the type of vehicle every time an old motorcycle went by. If this turned into a stepping-stone to bridging the distance between these two—meeting for the first time, and belonging to different Legions on top of that—then it was worth the work he had put into customizing the exhibit file.

When the group of six left the classroom after taking their time to fully experience the simple time travel, they all turned to Haruyuki and clapped for a second. Caught off guard, he teared up a little, and Niko mercilessly teased him about that, but he was sure that even this would be a good memory once the festival was over—probably.

Thinking about this, he stood at the head of the group and tried to move through the hallway down the stairs. At that moment...

“Oh! Prez! Hey!”

There was only one student at the school who called Haruyuki by this job title. Turning around, Haruyuki returned the greeting from this student whom he felt like he’d only very recently finally become comfortable talking to: Reina Izeki.

“H-hey. Oh right, Izeki, you’re doing the class B—”

He had gotten that far when Reina’s hands clapped together loudly to interrupt him. With her hands pressed together in front of her face, Reina uttered, unexpectedly, “Prez, I’m seriously sorry for skipping out on taking care of Hoo! Starting next week, I’m totes gonna be there with bells on!” Reina bowed low, and her long hair, with 50 percent more ringlets than usual, swung forcefully.

“Y-you don’t have to apologize,” Haruyuki said hurriedly. “You had a lot to do getting ready for your class’s thing, right?”

“Yeah, but Hoo gets hungry every day, y’know? Just ’cos I gotta do the festival thing doesn’t mean it’s okay to skip out. I’ve been popping in to see Hoo’s face anyway on my way home, but like, I just feel super-bad, you know?”

UI> PUTTING THAT KIND OF HEART IN IT, YOU’RE A WONDERFUL ANIMAL CARE COMMITTEE MEMBER, IZEKI.

This text was displayed in the bottom of their fields of view, so they turned around to find Utai smiling, both hands raised.

“Super Prez, you’re here, too! I’m def gonna take care of Hoo next week—” She was about to apologize once more when she snapped her mouth shut. She sent her gaze on a small tour, and then looked at Haruyuki with an indescribable expression. “Preeeez, all your guests are girls from other schools? Like, seriously, what’s up?”

“N-nothing’s up! Uh, um, so then, let’s give it our all with the Animal Care Club next week.” Babbling, Haruyuki plotted out an emergency escape.

But Reina smirked for some reason and cut him off. “You came all this way and all, how about stopping in at our café?”

“N-no, uh, we just had crepes, so...” It was when he started to say this, feeling that he should politely decline, that Haruyuki realized it: Class B’s project was supposedly a cosplay café, but Reina was only wearing an apron that said “Café Animal Kingdom” over her Umesato uniform, which didn’t seem very much in the way of costumery at all.

“You’re curious, yeah?” Reina grinned broadly, perhaps reading this thought on his face. She indicated the entrance to the classroom with her left hand. Pushed this far, he couldn’t walk away, and his interest was indeed piqued as to how exactly it was cosplay. He looked back ever so timidly.

“I figured it’d end up like this,” Niko said, her whole body radiating exasperation. “So then, should we go?”

“Kay.” The reason Pard immediately agreed was that she was curious about class B’s café, given that she worked every day in a maid costume. Or maybe not; it wasn’t clear.

The instant they slipped through the entrance—pushed onward by Reina’s “Table for seven!”—Haruyuki blinked his eyes several times. The other waitresses also wore aprons over their uniforms, and the neatly decorated classroom did have a fairly real café atmosphere to it. And unlike class C and its reliance entirely on AR displays, the brick walls and wooden window frames were printouts on synthetic paper pasted up, which must have taken a fair bit of time. The four tables—student desks pushed together—also had tablecloths neatly laid over them. The reason the café was named Animal Kingdom was apparently the stuffed animals of various sizes decorating the room.

Shown to a table big enough for eight, Haruyuki turned to Reina and inadvertently offered an ill-advised comment. “The decorations are amazing, but you couldn’t use AR textures for this?”

“We thought that, too, right? But we basically used up all our

class resources, you know?”

“Huh? A-are you using AR somewhere?” He whirled his head around, looking at the shop, but he couldn’t spot anything that looked like it. If he had to describe his surroundings, he’d say it felt like the back of the class was raised like a stage, and the student customers there were striking poses in groups of four and taking pictures, but the background was just the brick wall, and they were wearing Umesato uniforms. Reina and all the other waitresses were also in uniforms with aprons.

But Fuko, also looking at the stage, nodded as if it had all come together for her. “Oh, I see. Is that it, then? That’s why it’s a cosplay café. That’s quite the interesting idea, hmm?”

“So, that’s like, you can take as many pics as you want with one drink! Um, hmm, so what, what will you have?”

This conversation was incomprehensible to Haruyuki, but unable to question Reina further now that she was in full waitress mode, he looked down at the menu on the table. He had no sooner thought that it would be full of nothing but ready-made soft drinks when he froze at the names alongside them. “Kitty Prank,” “Lunchtime Lion.” According to the names, they were original nonalcoholic drinks made from fresh juice and flavored syrups.

After a bit of a commotion about this and that, they completed their order—Haruyuki forced to get the Dusk Crow, Pard voluntarily choosing the Leopard in the Tree—and after a few minutes, their drinks arrived from the kitchen set up in one corner of the classroom.

Just when they were chattering and finishing their drinks of various colors—the Dusk Crow was pretty good: black tapioca pearls floating in mango juice—the photo stage emptied out, so urged on by Reina, they stood up from their seats.

Apparently, the six girls had all figured out the mystery of the cosplay café already, and they walked with certain steps, but Haruyuki was still unsure. Although he stuck with everyone else and moved to the stage at the end of the line, he cocked his head from side to side, and his shirt was yanked on hard from behind. When he turned around, Reina's voice was quiet in his ear.

“Prez-wise, might be more fun to take pics than to have your pic taken, yeah?”

“Huh? Oh...um, yeah.” It was true that rather than get up on-stage alongside six girls, it suited him much more to figure out the composition as the photographer. They could take a group photo later, once they met up with Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Takumu. Haruyuki nodded and turned to Fuko and the others. “Okay, so I'll take the pictures! Get a little closer to each other in the middle. Kusakabe, a little to the right. Okay, that's good!”

He launched his field of view screenshot app, and in the moment when he was ready to shoot, a window appeared in the center of his virtual desktop with the words IT'S MAGIC TIME! At the bottom was a YES/NO button asking for permission to add an AR display. He furrowed his brow, wondering what the magic could have been, but it seemed that the six onstage had expected this development, and they all moved their fingers as one.

Given that, Haruyuki also raised his right hand and pushed the YES button.

Pwaaan! With a loud noise, the stage was blanketed in rainbow-colored smoke. Naturally, it wasn't real, but reflexively, he threw his head back. After a few seconds, the smoke disappeared, and the familiar faces of the lady Burst Linkers emerged from it once more. But.

“Whaa—?!” Haruyuki threw his head back once more with a shout. Because the appearance of all six had changed completely, except for their faces, hair, and physiques. Instead of the street

clothes they had been wearing, their bodies were wrapped in fur and feathers, and they had large ears on their heads and tails sprouting from their backsides. To express it one phrase, it was as though they had transformed with “animal magic.”

“...Oh, ohhh, so this is the magic time, then.” Finally understanding just half of the situation, Haruyuki focused on the six people on stage once more. They had all transformed into different animals. From the left, Rin was a gray fawn, Fuko a blue sea eagle, Utai a white ermine, Niko a pink rabbit, Akira a light-brown beaver, and Pard a yellow leopard with black spots.

Staring blankly at the troop of girls happily assessing one another’s transformations, Haruyuki was visited by yet another abrupt realization, and he cried out once more. “Oh! Did you all maybe turn into the animals of the drinks we had before?”

“That’s exactly it. But I mean, that was written pretty clearly on the menu,” Reina commented, rolling her eyes, and added as though the thought had just struck her, “Prez, you’re like that, yeah? One of those people who doesn’t read the manual when you DL the game.”

“Th-that’s totally me,” he replied with an embarrassed smile, and was reassured in his heart. The animal magic apparently happened only onstage, so photographer Haruyuki was still in his uniform, but if he had drunk a hippo something or an elephant whatever and gotten up onstage with everyone, right about now he would have been looking pretty pathetic. “But this is a seriously amazing AR program, huh? I mean, I think it’s pretty tough to perfectly match up a texture on a moving body without using markers.”

Getting over his surprise at the transformation, Haruyuki was now curious about the technology. It was a fair bit more difficult to do this than turn the walls and windows into the moving images he had revealed in the class C exhibit.

“I don’t really get the tough stuff either, but my brother’s a buyer for this pretty big shop, right?” Reina said, half-bragging and half-embarrassed. “So he borrowed this test program they developed. And the stuffed animal data along with it.”

“R-right...” The word before “shop” that Reina had omitted was probably not “video game” or “computer,” but something along the lines of fashion. Haruyuki guessed this much and bobbed his head up and down.

“Heeey, Prez. I don’t mean to interrupt your little chat, but maybe you could get around to taking the picture already?”

At Niko’s voice, Haruyuki hurriedly returned his gaze to the stage. “Oh! S-sorry! I’ll take it right now. So just stay like that, and I’ll take three pics in a row!” he called back. Haruyuki promptly pressed the shutter button on his camera app. A large countdown from three was displayed in his field of view, and when it hit zero, they heard a fake shutter sound.

Although it was a screenshot of his field of view, the Neurolinker in its current form didn’t have an eyeball sensor—it couldn’t record what your naked eye was seeing as is, but rather recorded the scene with small lenses built into the front and back of the Linker. Thus, during successive shots, the cameraperson had to remain as still as possible.

But when he had taken the first shot, he realized something and very nearly dropped his head. Hurrying to fix his neck in place again, he moved just his eyes to confirm it. In the window of the dress-up AR program displayed at the bottom of his virtual desktop, there appeared to be a button to deploy the options menu. He touched on it casually, and a selection menu appeared.

Most of the choices had names like MILANO COLLECTION SPRING/SUMMER 2047 or LONDON COLLECTION FALL/WINTER 2047, and the whole thing did have the air of the fashion world about it, which was incomprehensible to Haruyuki. Scrolling down to the

very bottom of the list, he found at item called ANIMAL FUR SUITS with a check mark next to it to indicate the current selection. He understood that it probably meant “stuffed animals,” so he gave a mental nod of satisfaction before noticing that there was one other item at the bottom of the list. The name was ANIMAL FUR SUITS S.

...Super? Special? Strong? he wondered, furrowing his brow, but this alone was impossible to hazard a guess at. The camera finished taking the three pictures at that point, so he decided to give this one a go, too, and lifted his finger to touch the item that was maybe strong stuffed animals. A confirmation window popped up, asking if he wanted to switch directly from the current outfit data, so he moved to press the YES button.

“Ah! Prez! Don’t!” Reina shouted at the same time as he pushed the button.

A second later, a magnificent scream came from the stage—actually, the only one who screamed a scream-like scream was Niko.

When Haruyuki lifted his face, he discovered that over 80 percent of the fur and feathers of the animal costumes had vanished, and in their place, a bare skin texture had been pasted over the figures of the six girls. This was nothing other than “animal-ish swimsuits” or maybe “beautiful girls in beast-person mode in a video game.”

“C-c’mon! Put it back!! I’ll knock your teeth out!!” Niko shrieked with a furious look on her face.

“This. Is a little. Embarrassing.” Rin’s eyes filled with tears.

Akira and Pard stared at him silently with icy glares.

“ ... ” “ ... ”

“Oh my goodness! I’ll have to give you a teeeensy punishment later, hmm?” Fuko commented with a smile, while Utai hid behind her, her face beet-red.



Seeing this situation on the stage, Haruyuki went into full panic mode. Wheezing, he tried to put the outfit data set back to what it was. But he was so flustered that he ended up waving both hands around, and his left hand hit a different window on his desktop before his right hand could get there.

After a count of 3, 2, 1 was displayed in his vision, the *snap* of the shutter rang out.

It was only once everything was all over that Reina informed him that the *S* in ANIMAL FUR SUITS *S* stood for *Sexy*.

Once the process of full-power apology and forcible photo deletion had been completed, it was exactly eleven o'clock.

They hurried back to the cafeteria to meet up with Chiyuri, who had removed her apron but was still wearing the rabbit ears. Thinking that he should be glad, very glad, that she and Kuroyukihime hadn't been at the Animal Kingdom, Haruyuki led the group, now eight people large, toward the kendo dojo.

On a sign hanging at the entrance, the words SAMURAI X DANCE twirled and pranced around, fanning anticipation and concern, but when they went inside, the standing-room-only seats were basically full. They somehow managed to carve out space for the eight of them and waited for the start of the performance in five minutes.

During that time, Haruyuki glanced any number of times at Rin's face in profile next to him. Although she had seemed like she was having fun when they were at the cosplay café, she did actually seem to be talking less than usual. But the windows were all covered with blackout curtains, and the lighting was lowered, so it was dim inside the dojo, and he couldn't tell if she looked pale or not.

“...Um, Kusakabe. If you're still not feeling good, just say so

and I can take you to the nurse's office....," he murmured on impulse.

Rin turned her face toward him and smiled. "Thank you. But. I'm okay."

"You are?" Haruyuki replied, but then felt the slightest sense that something was off with Rin's figure as she stood there.

Huh? He blinked hard, but at that moment, the lights in the dojo were turned off completely. He could hear the low, heavy sound of drums coming from somewhere. The volume gradually increased, hit a climax, and then stopped abruptly.

An intense spotlight cut through the silence. At some point, the dozen or so members of the boys' kendo team, wearing kimonos, had lined up in bold poses with their arms crossed in front of their chests in the center of the dojo. And the traditional clothes were not the team kendo uniforms—they were the warrior-style navy *hakama* pants under the light-blue *kamishimo* sleeveless jacket from the Edo era. They hadn't gone quite so far as to shave their heads save for a *chonmage* topknot, but they did all have the traditional white *hachimaki* sweatbands tied around their foreheads.

Standing in the center position of the front row was none other than Takumu. For today only, he had taken off his glasses and pushed his hair back, so there wasn't a speck of the usual professorial air about him. A shrill voice called "Mayuzumiiii!" and Haruyuki unconsciously peered at Chiyuri to his left, but she was apparently too worried about whether the performance would go well to be calling out to Takumu.

Silence fell once more, and Takumu slowly uncrossed his arms and brought his right hand to his left hip. Hanging there was neither a bamboo sword nor a wooden sword. He grabbed the hilt stretching out from a black sheath and yanked it out with a *shannk* to make a dazzling silver light dance through the air.

Naturally, it was not actually metal, but an imitation sword made of plastic with metallic paint. But the way Takumu moved gave it a sense of weight, so it looked like nothing other than the real thing. Clutching the sword in both hands, he slowly raised it up high above his head.

Then he froze, and just as the nervous excitement in the room was about to snap, Takumu brought his sword down sharply, in time with the booming of a large drum. After a pause, the other members of the team also unsheathed their swords, brandished them, and sliced through the air in perfect unison.

The group dance that followed was, in a word, stunning. Riding the beat of the large drum, the samurai stepped forward with a battle cry, waved their swords, jumped, and turned. At times, they were in perfect unison; at others, they staggered slightly as they danced their hearts out.

At some point, the music turned into Japanese-style rock with a good beat, and people in the audience started clapping along. Haruyuki clapped his hands together along with them as he stared at Takumu moving around and scattering drops of sweat. He had probably gotten the center position because of his height and good looks, but it might also have been because the rumors were true and he would be the next team captain once the summer tournament was over.

Behind Takumu to the left, a small-statured samurai danced with a very serious look on his face. Never taking his eyes off Takumu, the boy seemed to be following his movements very intently. Seiji Nomi, formerly the Twilight Marauder, Dusk Taker. He had been defeated in a sudden-death match in the Unlimited Neutral Field and lost both the Brain Burst program and his memory of the Accelerated World—he was no longer a Burst Linker.

The urge to plunder that had almost violently haunted him had disappeared, and now, as a serious, junior member of the

kendo team, he apparently adored Takumu. The overwhelming strength he'd had back when he was using the Physical Burst command was gone now, but he had absolutely had talent to begin with. For instance, even here, the sharpness and certainty of each of his dance moves was better than most of the other team members'. And more than anything else, there wasn't a hint of hatred or anything twisted on his still-cherubic face. For Nomi, Brain Burst had definitely been something like a curse.

No, I'm sure that's just what I want to think, Haruyuki thought in a corner of his brain as he clapped hard in time with the music that was growing ever more frenzied as it approached the climax.

Brain Burst was both a salvation and a curse for all Burst Linkers. It could even be said that this dual nature was the true essence of the Accelerated World. Good and evil existed in that place in equal measure. If Haruyuki had been guided by malice, he probably would have ended up as a Burst Linker possessed by hatred, the way Nomi had been. On the other hand, by pushing Dusk Taker to total point loss, Haruyuki had stolen the good that Nomi found and that he might have been able to find in the future in that world.

If only Brain Burst could be installed a second time.

Even knowing this thought was just selfish sentimentality, Haruyuki couldn't help thinking it. Although, of course, the Nomi of now wouldn't agree to a copy/install of a suspicious program at Haruyuki's invitation, what with them being basically strangers at this point. And more importantly, the Nomi of now didn't need the salvation of the Accelerated World. Even so, the thought that there could have been a different way wouldn't leave Haruyuki.

He couldn't have done anything about Nomi's parent, but if he had at least met Nomi before the Acceleration Research Society... If only they'd been able to simply and earnestly duel without the intervention of the BIC or the video trap. He and Nomi, with his

enormous hunger, could have come to understand each other at some point. Haruyuki wanted to believe that.

On the stage, the samurai paired off and faced one another, slamming their swords together at a slightly frightening speed. The clanking of metal was naturally a sound effect coming over the speakers, but it perfectly matched the swords as they came together before his eyes. The fierce mock fighting continued, the samurai switching partners one after another, and just as it started to take on a chaotic aspect, they all lined up and raised their swords above their heads. The music and the choreography all stopped, and the people clapping along stopped soon after.

Yaaaaah! With a mighty roar, all the dancers brought their swords slicing through the air, and the samurai dance was over.

Staring at Takumu and Nomi smiling under the spotlight, Haruyuki clapped as hard as he could along with everyone else in the audience.

“That was seriously amazing, Taku. How long did you guys practice for?” Haruyuki asked, immediately after they joined up with Takumu—now in a tracksuit.

“Aah,” his childhood friend, who had impressively handled the important role of dance captain, replied with a bashful look. “It’s more like we did the thing without any real rehearsal. We have the main tournament at the end of next month, so we couldn’t exactly take that much time to practice the routine or anything.”

“Still, it turned out pretty great, huh? And the costumes and lighting were solid, too,” Chiyuri remarked.

Takumu pulled his head back, looking even more embarrassed. “That’s ’cos the girls’ team worked super-hard for us. On everything from the choreography to the costumes—all of it. Although I was actually kinda embarrassed with that look.”

“Nah, not at all, Professor. If you could fight in *kamishimo* over there, too, your win rate’d prob’ly go up a little more,” Niko said, giggling.

“I-is that supposed to be a compliment?” Takumu responded, and the whole group burst out laughing. Even Pard, who normally didn’t laugh out loud, and Aqua Current, who somehow resembled her, were grinning along with the rest of them, and Haruyuki was glad.

Since it was almost lunchtime, they decided to wander around the refreshment booths outside this time and have lunch there, so the group, now nine people, stepped outside. If Kuroyukihime had been able to join them, they would have been a party of ten, but apparently, the student council project was going to take a little more time. Haruyuki got a mail from her to the effect that she would be able to come in another fifteen minutes, so he replied with where to meet them.

Then he suddenly remembered what she had said to him before the festival started, and he moved over to Fuko’s side. “Um, Master. Have you seen any movement that looks like an attack so far?”

“Oh, yes, right. I checked the matching list twice, but there was nothing unusual. Although we still can’t let our guard down.”

“Right. But I think that even a kit user would take one look at the Umesato list right now and run away with their tail between their legs...”

On top of the fact that the names of ten Burst Linkers were on the list, enough to rival the total for a smallish area list, there was one each of level six, seven, and eight, plus two level-nine kings to finish it off. He couldn’t believe that even Magenta Scissor would come barging into that.

Hearing Haruyuki’s optimism, Akira, who was situated in

front of Fuko, touched her glasses as she replied, “Put another way, it would also be a change to attack two kings at the same time. If their objective is simply to spread the kit infection, it’s quite possible they would try a suicide attack, completely prepared for defeat.”

“...U-understood. I’ll make sure to check the list frequently, too, to find them as soon as possible so we can attack first.”

“That’s a nice sentiment, but be careful not to waste your points.” When Akira—Aqua Current—said this to him, it carried real weight, and Haruyuki nodded silently.

Although he was discussing this with the Four Elements, Haruyuki expected that there wouldn’t be an attack that day after all. There was some distance between them and Magenta’s base in Setagaya, and in this situation, the list of attackers was too large. If they made a wrong step, not only would they be counter-attacked, but they might end up cracked in the real. Given how extremely rational Magenta was, even while having an ISS kit, he couldn’t believe she would carry out a reckless attack.

But.

Haruyuki had forgotten the tiny misgiving he’d felt three days earlier.

In fact, Magenta Scissor *had* attacked. And she’d already finished it before the school festival had even started.

Haruyuki understood this after Rin Kusakabe, walking behind him, fell forward without a sound as if to lean up against him.

At first, he figured she was actually just sick and it had nothing to do with Brain Burst. Rin hadn't looked good right from the start that morning. She had said it was food-related, but a simple digestive issue wouldn't have gone on for several hours. Cursing himself for not paying more attention, Haruyuki had Takumu help him bring her to the nurse's office on the first floor of the second school building.

Fortunately, all the beds were empty, so they laid Rin down on the one farthest in, but there was no sign of the health adviser, Ms. Hotta. He looked around the room and found a holotag spinning on top of the desk that said, OUT FOR ONE HOUR. I'M IN THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE. BE BACK SOON.

Haruyuki started to fly out of the room to go get her, but Takumu stopped him, saying, "I'll go get her; you stay with Kusakabe," so, with no other choice, he returned to Rin's bedside.

"It's not your fault, Corvus."

When he looked up, he saw Fuko, the only one of the troop of girls to come with them, standing next to him. Since they couldn't exactly march into the nurse's office en masse, the other six were on standby next to the fountain in the front yard. Fuko had come with them because, of course, she was Rin's parent.

"...I should have noticed. She might not look it, but Rin has a tendency to push herself too hard. I knew that, and yet..."

"No...All morning, I was thinking how Kusakabe didn't look good. But I just dragged her around all over the place anyway."

Biting his lip hard, he looked down at the girl lying on the bed before him. Her cheeks were pale, and her breathing was shallow and quick. If she hadn't been feeling well for several hours, then it wasn't just simple anemia, either. Maybe an unseasonal cold or... Still reproaching himself, he sent his thoughts racing around for an answer.

Abruptly, Rin opened her eyes a crack and said in a voice that threatened to fade out of existence, ".....I'm sorry, Arita. I'm sorry...Master Fuko."

"Oh! You don't have anything to apologize for, Kusakabe. I'm sorry for pushing you so hard. The nurse'll be here in a minute, so..." Haruyuki worked to keep his voice from jumping up into a shout.

But Rin moved her pale face slightly from side to side. "This... isn't. A cold. There's...nothing wrong. With. My body. What's struggling isn't. Me. It's my duel avatar...Yesterday. My brother was infected...with an ISS kit."

Rin told them that Magenta Scissor had challenged Ash Roller Saturday afternoon, in Setagaya Area No. 1. It had been right after Rin had left school, gotten on the bus on Kannana Road, and connected her Neurolinker globally.

Ash had fought bitterly against Magenta, who used the long-distance technique Dark Shot over and over, but normal resistance to an enemy who didn't hesitate to use Incarnate attacks was impossible. When Ash was finally no longer able to run, Magenta performed "surgery" using her scissors and forcibly infected him with the ISS kit.

Normally, this was when Rin would have immediately contacted Fuko and discussed how to respond. But Ash Roller, who had the personality of Rinta Kusakabe, Rin's older brother, had turned his thoughts to his beloved little sister. *I can hold on for a day, piece o' cake. So you go and have fun at the festival tomor-*

row.

“I. I thought about disobeying my brother. And calling you, Master. A lot. But. I...felt it. My brother had also been. Excited about Arita’s school festival. For a few days. So...I,” Rin said in a trembling voice, and then brought her right hand out from under the blanket to gently touch the Neurolinker on her neck.

Here, Haruyuki finally understood the reason why something felt off when he met Rin that morning.

Rin Kusakabe normally used a pastel-green Neurolinker. She only changed to the metallic gray one when she was dueling. This was the Neurolinker her older brother Rinta had used, and it was in this one that the Brain Burst program was installed.

So on that day of the school festival, when there was no need to duel, Rin should have been wearing her own Neurolinker. But from the time they had met up at the front gate that morning, her brother’s terminal had been equipped on her neck. Perhaps the reason for that was that she wanted to communicate the atmosphere of the school festival to Rinta, who was in a coma in a hospital in Shibuya.

But the truly terrifying part of the ISS kit was that, even when you weren’t accelerated, even when you took your Neurolinker off, this mental parasite kept progressing steadily. The kit that had infiltrated Rin’s duel terminal had been growing bit by bit—after she got home the previous day, while she was asleep, when she set out for Umesato that day, and while she was going around the school festival.

“...We have to hurry and purify it before the parasite goes any farther...” Haruyuki leaned over the bed and squeezed a voice from his throat, staring at her Neurolinker, which had a crack like a lightning bolt on the outside. Once the personality change advanced, it would be extremely difficult to remove the kit. Even the two good friends of Chocolat Puppeteer he’d met the other day in

Setagaya area had turned deaf ears on Chocolat's desperate pleas at first.

No, more than anything, I don't want to see an Ash Roller controlled by the kit. No way.

Haruyuki jerked his head up and turned back toward Fuko. The Nega Nebulus deputy also seemed quite shocked, but the second she met Haruyuki's eyes, she nodded resolutely.

"Corvus, we should first check on Ash's condition. But if we duel over the local net, then Sacchi and the others will be pulled into the Gallery."

"A direct duel, then. I have a cable." He dug around in his small daypack and pulled out an XSB cable. A similar cable appeared from Fuko's pouch so the three of them could all direct. He opened up two of the folding chairs set against the wall and sat down before plugging one end of the cable into his own Neurolinker and offering the other end to Rin.

"Kusakabe...Can I?" he asked.

Rin showed him a faint smile, while still looking quite pained. "The opposite...of that time, huh?"

He understood what she meant immediately. Ten days earlier, when he became the sixth Chrome Disaster, Haruyuki had tried to run away from his Legion comrades, but Rin, at their first meeting (on the first floor of his condo), had stopped him. She had pushed him back in the rear seat of Fuko's car, parked in the basement of his building, and forced him to direct. To save him.

"...We're definitely going to save your brother," Haruyuki said, and Rin nodded, the faint smile still on her lips, as she turned her head to the right. Haruyuki inserted the plug in his right hand gently into the exposed direct terminal of her Neurolinker.

At basically the same time, Fuko's cable was connected with Haruyuki's Neurolinker from the left. When the warning of two wired connections was displayed, he heard the sound of several feet approaching quickly in the hallway outside. Takumu was returning with the health adviser in tow.

Haruyuki glanced at Fuko, and they nodded together. A normal duel was at most 1.8 seconds. They'd definitely be finished before they arrived.

"I'll be the starter," Fuko announced, and before Haruyuki could object, she was murmuring the acceleration command. "Burst Link."

A virtual thunder roared, and the sight before his eyes of Rin and the nurse's office froze blue—along with the hustle and bustle of the festival, which was picking up now that it was the afternoon.

Haruyuki's wish for a favorable stage was at last half granted.

Before his feet touched down on the ground, he could hear busy music with an accordion as the main player. In the old fighting games, each stage had its own background music, but stages with music were fairly rare in Brain Burst.

Listening to the music, which was cheerful yet slightly eerie—perhaps because the sound was off occasionally—Haruyuki quickly checked out his surroundings.

Outside. Probably the roof of the Umesato Junior High second school building. And because he was a member of the Gallery, he had materialized a distance away from the two duelers.

The sky was dark, but Umesato, on the ground, was blanketed in a warm light. About two stories above the ground, electric wires were suspended under dark clouds, with several large incandescent light bulbs, the kind that weren't found in the real

world anymore, hanging down from them.

Zzt, zzt. Beneath the lights, which buzzed and occasionally flickered unreliably, human-shaped silhouettes with no real substance writhed in groups of twos and threes. Forming circles and dancing or walking along in groups, the shapes were skinny like poles and only about a meter or so tall, so they had the same sort of bustling strangeness to them as the music did. Shabby booths were lined up along the wall of the school building, and the shadow shopkeepers—who sported no substance, of course—were selling their curious wares. Similar to the atmosphere of the school festival in the real world, but decisively different somehow, this was the Bizarre Festival stage. A midlevel dark type.

Given that it was dark, it was a tricky stage, with all kinds of gimmicks to interfere with movement built into it, but this time, there was the possibility that the battle wouldn't even happen at all. Haruyuki raced to the edge of the roof and looked down in the direction indicated by the guide cursor.

Both duelists had already left the nurse's office for the world outside. At the entrance of the front yard, wedged in between the second school building, which Haruyuki occupied, and the first one, he could see a slender duel avatar sitting in a wheelchair. Motionless there, paying no mind to the swarms of tiny figures around her, was the deputy of Nega Nebulus, "Strong Arm" Sky Raker.

Her eyes should have been turned toward Ash Roller, but lacking directionality, the light of the incandescent bulbs didn't reach that far. Plus, he couldn't see past the front gates of the courtyard, where the world sank into darkness. But if this was the usual Ash, then he'd be rolling up with a "Hey, heeeeeeey!" and revving his massive engine as soon as the duel started. Haruyuki was forced to decide that Ash being silent now meant he was already not in his normal mental state. Beside himself at the thought, Haruyuki flung himself from the roof.

Because he was in the Gallery, even falling from the third floor had no impact. Landing gently outside the nurse's office window, Haruyuki moved to approach the wheelchair to discuss the situation with Raker. But immediately before he could, an intense light cut through the darkness near the main gate.

The light source was not the familiar yellowish-white halogen lamp, but rather a ruby-colored one, like a red traffic light, or blood. The black silhouettes squirmed and shuffled, trying to escape the vertical range of the illumination. Then the roar of an internal combustion engine starting filled the stage. This too was not the usual sunny sound of the V-twin; the low, wet, rumbling groan sounded more like the threatening protest of a large living creature.

Bathed in the sinister light and sound, Raker, in her wheelchair, didn't so much as flinch. The fluid metal of her hair parts and the hem of her white dress fluttering slightly, she stared directly ahead of her.

As if irritated by this silence, the red light finally moved. It approached slowly at first and then gradually picked up speed, so that by the moment it appeared beneath the light of the incandescent bulbs, the engine was howling violently. This acceleration exceeded the domain of a motorcycle, and in Haruyuki's eyes, it looked like nothing other than the leap of a massive beast wrapped in black and silver.

Sky Raker and her wheelchair were by far the smaller of the two, but she still didn't move a muscle, even as she saw this massive form charging toward her. She simply narrowed her dark-rose eye lenses slightly and appeared to be measuring her timing.

In the Territories not that long before, Raker had avoided Ash's charging attack with the superhuman feat of luring him in until the very last possible second before grabbing on to the handlebars as she dashed backward to flip the bike.

But he couldn't believe she'd be able to use the same technique again here. The acceleration of the motorcycle was on a different level, and there was a door a mere ten meters behind Raker. Plus, entry into buildings was not allowed in the Bizarre Festival stage, so there basically wasn't enough space for her to do a back dash.

"M-Master!!" Haruyuki kept the volume of his voice in check, but he couldn't keep himself from calling out.

But Raker stayed where she was, her hands resting lightly on the wheels of her chair. The headlight, now impossibly close, dyed her entire body the color of blood, and the roar of the engine pushed her hair and skirt up around her.

Just as the ferociously spinning front wheel of the motorcycle was on the verge of making contact with the slender wheelchair, Raker finally moved. More precisely, what Haruyuki saw was nothing more than a series of overlapping, glittering silver after-images. The wheelchair spun around and escaped to the left so fast that Haruyuki couldn't actually see it.

The power of Raker's wheelchair to dash from a standstill far surpassed the speed other duel avatars could manage with their own legs. This power of mobility was essentially teleporting over short distances, but up until that point, Haruyuki had thought it could only be used to go forward or backward. After all, the wheels were fixed to the chair itself and couldn't turn to the sides. So the chair couldn't actually move directly sideways; to dash to either side from a stop, she would first have had to turn and then advance.

And yet, at that moment, Raker's wheelchair was sliding directly to the left as she made multiple turns, though with what kind of logic Haruyuki didn't know. The large motorcycle couldn't keep up, and it skidded past, shooting up sparks for a moment as it aimed to crash into the closed door. Anticipating the collision, Haruyuki clenched his teeth.

But there was no impact nor explosion. Immediately in front of the wall, the motorcycle crouched down for an instant like a beast before leaping up at an acute angle. When the tire made contact with the school wall, the machine trail braked hard. Once the nose had come around ninety degrees, the machine stopped on a dime.

The massive metal body glued motionless to the vertical wall was such a strange sight, it almost knocked his sense of gravity out of whack. Ash Roller's bike did indeed have the ability to drive up walls, but it shouldn't have been able to stop on the wall like that. In fact, the bike itself was different from before, so totally transformed that no traces of its old self remained.

"...Ash..." Squeezing out this voice that was not a voice, Haruyuki stared up at the motorcycle on the wall, right where the Umesato school crest would have been. The front and rear tires were thicker, and a series of sharp, fang-like protrusions had popped up in the centers of the treads. The front fork and the gas tank were covered in silver scales reminiscent of a snake, and the exhaust pipes coming from the engine were grotesque, the in-nards of a living creature.

Or maybe it was actually a living creature now. Because the rider who was supposedly the machine's master—in other words, Ash Roller himself—was fused with the bike. The hands gripping the handlebars, the feet stepping on the pedals, even the head and body were covered in a scaly metal shell, completely obscured from the outside.

Despite this, Haruyuki sensed a powerful gaze shooting out from the bike. He soon understood the reason for that. The headlight emitting the red glow was not a light fixture; it was a single enormous eyeball. A crimson eye encased in a black organism; an eye he had seen any number of times recently, empty but at the same time hiding a powerful malice and lust.

"That's—the ISS kit...in the bike...!!"

As if it could hear Haruyuki's groan, the red headlight slowly blinked once. The engine, like an internal organ, growled, and the black and silver organic machine slowly ascended the wall, headlight still facing the ground—it was moving in reverse. This was definitely impossible with Ash Roller's motorcycle under normal circumstances. The direction of the red illumination rolled over to Sky Raker, who was stopped once more on the south side of the courtyard. Like a carnivorous beast eyeing its prey, the light quickly blinked again.

From the look of it, Haruyuki could only assume that it was the parasitic ISS kit itself moving the motorcycle. It was impossible to guess at present what kind of state Ash Roller had been placed in inside of the shell. The purpose of this direct duel was to talk with him and see exactly what the situation was, but to do that, it would be necessary to first render the motorcycle helpless. But given the extent to which it had become one with its user, it would be an extremely difficult job to selectively destroy the Enhanced Armament alone. Sky Raker could try to knock it over or flip it, but the machine wouldn't release the rider it had swallowed up.

What was more frightening to him than anything else was the thought that the irregular phenomenon of the kit parasitizing the Enhanced Armament and the control that had grown so strong in just that short time would obstruct any purification. The whole time a duel avatar was parasitized, the kit was interfering with the Linker's mind. If they didn't remove it right away and return it to its sealed-card state, Ash Roller and Rin Kusakabe—Haruyuki's precious friends, allies who had helped him out any number of times—might end up irrevocably changed.

Spurred on by a foreboding that threatened to burn him up, Haruyuki shouted in a trance, "Ash...! Please wake up, Ash! You're not going to lose to a kit like that...Right?!"

Perhaps in response to his cry, the growling of the bike engine grew louder.

And then Haruyuki saw them: two large holes on the surface of the cowl undulating organically on either side of the red headlight, opening a mouth.

But this was not a sign that the rider was being released. Inside the holes, an energy blacker than darkness coalesced. Purple sparks flickered, and the entire machine shuddered violently.

Understanding intuitively what was about to happen, Haruyuki started to cry out again, “Master, ru—”

But his words were drowned out in the weighty sound of vibration. Jet-black energy bullets shot out of the holes in the cowl: Dark Shot, one of the Incarnate techniques the ISS kit gave to its users. The long-distance attack was fearsome, destroying everything it hit with a nihilistic energy, and now there were two of them at the same time.

If the slender wheelchair was even lightly grazed by the Incarnate bullets, it would be destroyed, robbed of the ability to dance around the stage. And yet Sky Raker did not move. Resolutely staring at the two spheres of darkness closing in on her, she smoothly raised her right hand. Leisurely opening up her fingers, she rotated the hand brandished in front of her once in a small circle.

“Swirl Sway.”

At the same time as the name of the technique was announced, a pale-blue light enveloped her right hand. The light swirled with incredible force, centered on her palm, and called up a wind. This immediately grew into a small tornado that shook the entire courtyard.

The two Dark Shots were swallowed up the instant they touched the tornado, but even as they whirled around impossibly fast, they moved stubbornly toward Raker as if they had their own will. They pressed in until they were a few centimeters from

her palm, but there, they were overpowered by the tornado and flung outward. One shot hit the first school building, while the other slammed into the wall of the second.

The fact that entry was impossible also meant that it was impossible for the building object to be destroyed, but the wall was completely cut away by the explosion of nihilistic energy. Given that it could repel an Incarnate technique with that much force, the tornado of light generated by Sky Raker also had to have been Incarnate. Defensive, quick activation—very much the domain of a master.

Incarnate techniques were divided up into four categories according to their characteristics. Was the source of power hope or despair? Did the effect extend to individuals or over a range? As far as Haruyuki knew, Sky Raker—Fuko Kurasaki—was the most powerful user of “positive will with range as its target.” And that was because she believed in the Incarnate System—in Brain Burst, in the Accelerated World, and in the power of the bonds found and forged there.

Fuko would definitely be able to pull Ash Roller back from the darkness. She would beat back the malice that tortured Rin. With that conviction in his heart, Haruyuki took his gaze off Raker and looked up at the living bike stuck to the wall above the entrance. And then he opened his eyes wide, dumbfounded.

It wasn't there. Although he had taken his eyes off it for just a couple of seconds, the motorcycle had disappeared. But that was impossible. Even the ISS kit couldn't overcome Ash Roller's greatest weakness of making a loud noise when he moved.

As a worst-case scenario, he could believe that, just like the kit had changed the structure of the transmission and made it possible to ride in reverse, it had somehow gotten rid of the explosive noise of the gasoline engine. But as long as the bike was a bike, it couldn't move without the tires hitting a wall or the ground or something. And with those fang-like protrusions on the tires,

Haruyuki should have heard some kind of serious noise.

No, wait.

There was just one place where it could move without even the tires making noise. That was—

“Master! Above you!!” Haruyuki screamed, looking up at the sky.

There were no stars in the night sky of the Bizarre Festival stage, and it was covered with thick clouds that threatened rain at any second. But in the center of the gray rectangle, punched out on three sides by the walls of the school building, was a conspicuous black shadow: the motorcycle. Using the cover of the roar when the two Dark Shots hit the school, it had revved its engine for just a moment and jumped from the wall.

Leaping to attack its prey, very much the act of a carnivorous beast, the motorcycle dropped from the sky toward Raker. Naturally, she could have avoided it with a dash of her wheelchair. But if an object of that weight class crashed into the earth, it would generate a shock wave more than enough to stomp a large avatar. If she took a stagger effect while she was moving, there was a danger that the lightweight wheelchair would fall over. That said, if she didn’t dodge, she’d inevitably be pinned down and hit with massive—

“...Master...!” Even though Haruyuki knew in his head that he couldn’t interfere at all as a member of the Gallery—he couldn’t even get within ten meters of the duelers—he instinctively moved to leap from the wall of the school building. But just on the verge of doing that, he saw it: Raker’s eyes shining with a sharp light in the darkness.

For her, this was not checkmate. Just the opposite. Fuko had been patiently waiting for the motorcycle to jump, for it to reveal its defenseless belly in midair, where it lost its mobility.

A dazzling blue light was born on Raker's back.

Whm! The sound of a powerful jet.

Her white hat was blown off, her dress was ripped to shreds and then vanished, and even the wheelchair was pushed back. In the next instant, the graceful F-type avatar with sky-blue armor shot up from the ground, two jets of flame stretching out from her back, at a speed that far surpassed Silver Crow's maximum vertical ascent power. It was the power of the booster-type Enhanced Armament, born from her heart's desire to reach the sky—Gale Thruster.

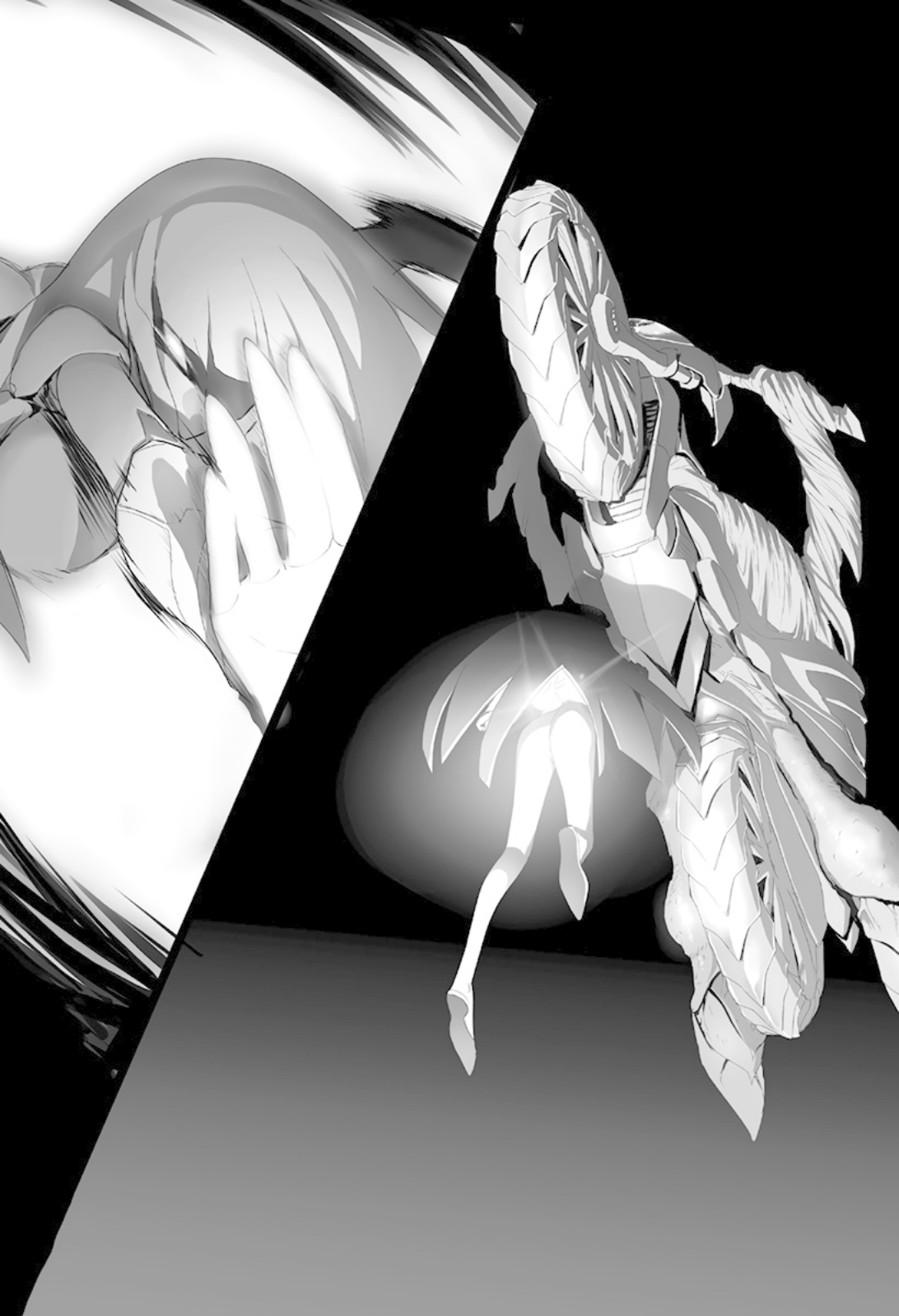
Reaching the height of the falling bike in an instant, Raker brought her slender-looking right hand up to the bottom of the engine without a moment's hesitation. Not a fist or a chopping hand, but a palm strike. The sound of impact rang out like thunder, and the manifold that looked so much like a gastrointestinal tract was torn free and sent flying, while red flames gushed from cracks that appeared all over the engine block.

Even still, the living motorcycle didn't stop. The kit parasite in the headlight shone fiercely, and the front and rear tires were enveloped in a thick black aura. Of course, only the rear tire was spinning, but when Raker's long hair touched the radiating inky overlay, it was ripped off without a sound. Most likely, this was an ability corresponding to the close-range Incarnate technique Dark Blow. If she was caught up in that rotation, even Raker wouldn't make it out unscathed.

But the sky-blue avatar didn't show any sign of faltering; she continued to beat at the engine with palm strikes. The cracks spread even farther, and the flames leaking out became an orange rain falling to the ground. The spin of the tire slowed, and the red eyeball flickered, struggling.

The damage to the motorcycle was serious, but Ash Roller's health gauge, displayed in the upper right of Haruyuki's field of

view, had basically not dropped at all. Here, Haruyuki finally understood Fuko's true aim: If she attacked the heart of the living bike that was the engine while on the ground, Ash himself, locked in the metal shell above it, would inevitably be dragged in. But if she attacked from directly below in the sky, she could target the engine alone without friendly fire on the rider. In other words, Fuko's main priority as she fought was not to destroy the terrifying living motorcycle, but rather to avoid hurting Ash Roller.



That's so like you, Master!! Haruyuki shouted this in a corner of his heart, and Gale Thruster roared even more loudly.

The Thruster's propulsive force overcame the weight of the bike, and the massive black machine was yanked up into the air. Raker took her hands off the engine for just that moment and shot out each hand to strike hard with her palms. Despite the fact that these blows came from too close to have any significant force behind them, the engine block was completely shattered, and the frame was ripped apart such so that the motorcycle was basically split into two.

Immediately after that, a massive explosion dyed the dark sky of the Bizarre Festival stage red.

As the ball of flames swallowed Raker and Ash, their health gauges suddenly dropped—but that soon stopped. Opening his eyes wide, Haruyuki watched as a beam of sky-blue light shot up through the expanding ball of flames. Clutched tightly in Sky Raker's arms as she danced high up into the night sky was the familiar skull-faced avatar in the leather jacket.

“...Master...! Ash...!!”

Tearing up, Haruyuki shouted in the loudest voice he could manage, waving his hands wildly.

Haruyuki tried to race over to where Raker landed in the courtyard, but halfway there, he stopped advancing, no matter how hard he pumped his legs. When he thought about it, the duel was still ongoing, even if the Enhanced Armament had been destroyed, so the rule about the Gallery not being allowed within ten meters of the duelers was still in effect.

As he flailed in vain at the border of the prohibited zone, Fuko glanced at him and raised her right hand, telling him, “Wait,” with the aura of a wry smile bleeding through. Then she turned

the palm of her hand around ninety degrees and mercilessly chopped at the helmet of Ash Roller, who appeared to still be unconscious. Paying no mind to the fact that Ash's health gauge had dropped to around 5 percent, she raised her hand one more time.

"Wake up, Ash," she said kindly. "If you don't wake up before the count of three, the next one will hurt a little more. ♡ Okay, three, two, one..."

Whp! The second chop whistled through the air, and immediately before the center of the skull face could be cracked open, a thick cry echoed in his ears: "Nooo!"

Hands in leather gloves came together to make a small X. "No more chopping!! I'm awake! I am perfectly waked up, Master!!"

"Oh, you are? Then stand up on your own." She had no sooner said the words than she was pulling away the hand supporting Ash's back. Not even glancing at her beloved pupil falling with a *thud*, Fuko quickly brought up her Instruct menu. Still lying on his side, Ash pressed the confirmation window that appeared before him, and in Haruyuki's field of view, flaming text announced that the duel had ended in a draw.

And then the wall that had prevented him from moving forward vanished, and he tumbled over from the excessive force of leaning into that wall. He got back to his feet after a somersault and raced over to them as fast as he could.

"A-Ash! A-are you okay?!" He screeched to a halt next to the rider splayed on the ground and peered at his face.

"The hell. You're here, too, you damned crow? But nah, I'm all right, obvs. A chop or two is nothing for mighty me."

"I'm not talking about the chops!! Your head—I mean, your thinking..."

“Whoa, you. My super-fine head is o’course super-mega-cool every time,” Ash replied, giving Haruyuki a thumbs-up, but his voice didn’t have its usual energy to it. Haruyuki offered Ash his hand to pull him up into a seated position, and then sat down next to him himself. Having recovered her wheelchair, Fuko also sat, so that she was facing the two of them.

The first one to break the brief silence was Ash. Placing his hands on the knees of his crossed legs, he bowed his head deeply toward his teacher and Brain Burst parent, Fuko. “...I’m sorry, Master. I messed up.”

“No need to apologize. I’m also responsible for not anticipating the situation.”

At this exchange, Haruyuki took a deep breath and then uttered the words he had prepared before the duel began. “Um...I’m actually the one who has to apologize here!”

“What do you mean by that, Corvus?”

“...On Wednesday this week—so three days before Ash was attacked—I heard it from the mouth of Magenta Scissor herself. That she was going to give up on attacking the north and invade the east. I should have remembered right then and there. East of Setagaya Area Two, where I ran into Magenta, is Setagaya Area One, where Shimokitazawa is. And immediately east of that is Shibuya Area Three, Sasazuka in Shibuya, where Rin’s school is.”

The instant after Haruyuki announced this, his heart nearly breaking, Ash was grabbing the neck of his armor, given that there was no collar to grab and yank him up by.

“You damned crow!! You— How’d you know?! I mean, that she’s a student at the Sasazuka Girls’ Academy junior high division?!”

“I-is she?! I mean, I didn’t know her school name! I just kinda

had an idea it was in Sasazu—”

“Shaddap! Shaaaaaddap! So you’re all up and stalking her after the morning duel! Secretly jumping on the same bus as Rin, following her all the way to school, you creepy little crow!!”

“I-I’d be late for school if I did that!”

“Shut it. Which is more important, Rin or being late?!”

“Th-that’s a weird question!”

“All right. If you don’t end that here, it’s going t’ hurt, you know?”

Fwssh. Once they both had returned to their original positions (Ash went beyond cross-legged to formally sitting on his knees), Fuko first turned to Haruyuki.

“Corvus. It is indeed a mistake you should reflect upon for not making use of hard-won information. But I also misread Magenta Scissor’s strategy. Neither Lotus nor I anticipated her aiming to disseminate the kits not only by invading festivals through local nets but by also by courting the danger of challenging others and getting into regular duels. If I was going to make doubly sure, I had the choice of forbidding Rin from connecting globally until the issue was resolved.” The sky-blue avatar narrowed her eyes regretfully.

“No, you’re wrong, Master!” Ash, sitting formally next to Haruyuki, shook his skull helmet fiercely. “The problem’d never resolve with just me cutting off the net and doing a whole ‘run away from the Accelerated World’ thing. You and Master Lotus and even this crow here taught me that!”

Haruyuki reeled slightly at this unexpected line, and Fuko also blinked slowly once. “Huh? I—I did?” he asked.

“I do also question if I taught you that?”

“Yes, you did! Not in words, but like, through life...life...” Ash brought his face close and asked in a whisper. “Hey, Crow, how do you say ‘the way you live your life’ in English?”

“Uh, um...” Haruyuki unconsciously fell into thought. “*Lifestyle*...maybe that’s not quite it...It’s more like a path for living, so *way*...*Way of life* or something, I guess?”

“That’s it! That way! Of! Life! You taught me!” Ash said, the tension in his voice fluctuating wildly, and Haruyuki understood what he was trying to say.

Following the destruction of the first Nega Nebulus, Kuroyukihime cut her connection to the global net and disappeared from the Accelerated World, while Fuko also retired from dueling and lived as a recluse at the top of the old Tokyo Tower, where other people couldn’t come near her. But both of them had broken down the walls of those stagnant worlds and stepped outside. To accelerate themselves once more.

Haruyuki even understood the reason Ash had added his own name to that list, too, but putting that aside for the moment, he nodded. “Right...Even if you lose the duel, even if you lose everything for the moment, you can always get it back again. I mean, Ash, you were parasitized by the ISS kit, but you came back to us. I didn’t know what to do when Rin collapsed, but this...I feel a little relieved somehow.”

He had spoken that much until he noticed Ash and Raker both looked extremely serious still, so he gradually slowed down.

“...Um...Ash and Rin are both going to be okay now, right? I mean, the ISS kit didn’t parasitize Ash’s actual body, but the motorcycle—the Enhanced Armament, and you completely destroyed the bike before, Master, so...”

“Look, Crow. Sorry to get your hopes up for nothing, but...the problem’s exactly that.”

“...Wh-what do you mean...?” Haruyuki opened his eyes wide under his mirrored helmet.

“Corvus,” Fuko said in a quiet voice, “even if an Enhanced Armament is completely destroyed in a duel, it will return in its usual form in the next duel, yes? So then if Ash duels again, I expect he’ll be returned to that form we saw in the beginning, trapped in the parasitized motorcycle. The ISS kit hiding in his Neurolinker isn’t gone.”

“Huh...? So, so then the interference with Rin’s mind...”

“We should assume it will continue unchanged after this duel.”

“B-but—!!” Haruyuki held his breath and stared at the timer in the upper part of his field of view. There were about six hundred seconds left. Once that time passed, the kit Fuko had worked so hard to destroy would be regenerated, and Ash would return to that terrifying form. Was that what she meant?

“Then...let’s hurry and purify it! We’ll call Mei or Bell and get them to burn the kit out or return it to a sealed-card state, and then the interference will end!” Haruyuki said forcefully, but Fuko didn’t nod her agreement this time.

“It’s unfortunate...but I’m forced to conclude that that would be difficult as well. Regardless of whether we use Maiden’s purification flames or Bell’s rewinding time, in order for the ISS kit to be removed from the user, there needs to be the will to refuse the temptation of that power. A will strong enough to negate the negative Incarnate that the kit itself possesses.”

“Then there’s no problem! Like Ash would ever lose out to that kit! I mean, he’s here with us right now, the usual Ash...”

Haruyuki leaned forward, and Ash gently pushed him back with a hand wrapped in a riding glove. "...Sorry, Crow. Nice you feel that way an' all...But you said it yourself, yeah? The problem's that that eyeball's parasitizing my Enhanced Armament. Listen. The bike's a part of me. But, like, the bike itself isn't self-aware. It can't come up with any kind of willpower to reject the ISS kit, y'know."

"That's exactly it," Fuko agreed. "Most likely—no, undoubtedly, even if we tried purification of rewinding, we wouldn't be able to separate the bike from the kit. Despite this, because the motorcycle and Ash are strongly connected through the Image Control System, the kit will generate mental interference. If she planted the kit in the motorcycle rather than Ash with the deliberate goal of bringing this situation about...Magenta Scissor is a fearsome opponent."

"S-so then, Ash, you could use the Image Control System, too, and communicate a will to the bike—" But at this, Haruyuki finally remembered a critical piece of information:

This wasn't the first time he'd seen an ISS kit parasitizing an Enhanced Armament. Ten days earlier, when he had been given the kit by this same Magenta Scissor and ended up equipping it, Takumu—Cyan Pile—had also been parasitized not with the red eyeball in the center of his chest, where it usually took up residence, but in the Enhanced Armament of his right arm, Pile Driver.

When Chiyuri asked him if she could erase the kit with Citron Call Mode II, Takumu had rejected the possibility. He had said the reason was that the kit itself refused to be separated through Incarnate power, but perhaps Takumu had sensed this, too. That if the kit had invaded his Enhanced Armament, which was equivalent to a part of his own body, the separation would be more difficult than a parasite in the main body of his avatar.

As if to add evidence to Haruyuki's thoughts, Ash hung his

head low. “When this duel started, I was desperately trying to get back control from inside the bike. But, like, the instant the battle started, some kinda will or something poured into me, like this tsunami, from the kit, and I basically passed out. Next time I opened my eyes was after Master rescued me. It’s, like, when the kits got Olive and them, it sorta got in the way of what they actually wanted, right? But for me, the kit—the bike, parasitized by the kit, the only thing I can think is it’s moving on its own. Honestly, wrestling back control from that thing is serious no-way town when I haven’t even trained in the Incarnate System...”

“...Now that you mention it...the kit that parasitized the Pile Enhanced Armament tried to parasitize us with several kits of its own will. And that time, too, rewinding with Citron Call was no good in the end,” Haruyuki muttered, growing more disheartened by the second, until he finally thought up the next solution and yanked his head up. “I—I got it! Even when the Enhanced Armament is parasitized, we could— If we directly attack the ISS kit during parallel processing in the Brain Burst central server, we can annihilate it! I-I’ll direct with Rin and sleep with her tonight! And then when I sneak into the central server, destroy the kit—”

Here, Haruyuki finally became aware of what exactly he was saying and hurriedly waved both hands while shaking his head. “N-no, it’s not like that, Bro! I don’t mean it like that! No way!”

“Who you callin’ brother, you giga suuuuuuuuck!” Roaring, Ash yanked his left fist up high—and then placed it on Haruyuki’s right shoulder.

“Huh?” He stopped shrinking into himself. “Uh, um...?”

“.....Well, you know. Gotta say thanks, Crow. You thinking about my sis—about Rin.”

“.....A-Ash?”

“But, like, sorry, you know? Time’s up. That ISS kit parasite’s

movin' hella fast. Def not gonna make it to tonight. I even thought about destroying the Enhanced Armament, the bike itself, but that's a hella tough job, too. I either have to yield it to another Burst Linker in a direct duel or sell it in a shop in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but whichever way, the bike won't actually be gone. And if I mess it up, not only does the mental interference keep going for Rin, I maybe might make everything a whole lot worse, y'know?"

"Th...That's..." Haruyuki was at a loss for words.

Ash had casually tossed out the idea of getting rid of the motorcycle, but there was no way he didn't understand just how serious that was. Ash Roller was a Burst Linker with basically all of his potential poured into his American motorcycle Enhanced Armament. If he lost it, his battle power wouldn't just be halved. Forget leveling up; it would be a mean feat just to maintain his points.

But Ash Roller's resolve, his feelings for his little sister Rin Kusakabe, were even greater than Haruyuki had imagined.

"Crow." Hand still on Silver Crow's shoulder, Ash spoke in the calmest voice Haruyuki had ever heard from him. "But, like. There's just one way to stop Rin's suffering. A way to totally erase the ISS kit from inside the Neurolinker and end the mental interference."

"...What's that?"

"Me disappearing. Right here, right now, I leave Great Wall, and I get Master to let me join Nega Nebulus. Then in the next duel, I get the Judgment Blow from the Black King. Then I'll vanish as a Burst Linker. With the ISS kit, yeah?"

Even after Ash closed his mouth, Haruyuki couldn't react for a while. Finally, he slowly shook his head. Over and over and over, he intently moved his head from left to right and back again.

While he did, he pushed a hoarse voice from his throat: “No. No way, not that. You said this to me ten days ago when I was one with the Armor, didn’t you? You said hang on right to the last second, don’t give up. Grit your teeth and fight to the end. So I fought. I managed to make it back to everyone again. So why...? Why...?”

“Aah...that’s right. If—if it was just my problem, that’s prob’ly what I’d do. Even with the parasite progressing and me getting even wilder than before, I’d prob’ly be all ‘as long as it works out in the end, that’s okay by me.’ But you know, Rin...” He cut himself off and lifted his gaze from the ground to stare directly at Haruyuki through his skull-patterned face shield. “...If Rin said something awful to the people around her now, even just once, because of the kit—especially you, Crow—she’d never come back from it. Even if we did manage to purify the kit after that, she’d never forgive herself. She’d blame herself, just blame, blame, blame, and then cry, cry, cry. And I don’t wanna see that Rin. I wanna settle this on my own before it’s too late. And that’s what Rin wants, too. She was ready for this. She came to your school festival to make her last memories as a Burst Linker. She’s been looking forward to this day for forever...”

“...But. But when you’re not a Burst Linker anymore, then,” Haruyuki said, forcing his voice out, “then...memories related to the Accelerated World, all of them...”

“...Yeah, guess so. But I’m pretty sure she won’t forget today at least. Going around with you, seeing the stuff, laughing her head off, having a great time. Just her memory of today, you know. So, Crow— No, *Haruyuki*. Make friends with her again. Even if you can’t duel, there’s all kinds of other stuff to do. Like study together or go watch motorcycle racing or something. But I’ll tell you one thing, as her big bro, I’ll be giga damned if I let you do anything more than that.”

The last part Ash said more as a joke, but Haruyuki couldn’t look him squarely in the eye; virtual droplets of water kept ob-

scuring his vision from the other side of Silver Crow's visor.

It was just too sudden. He had never even imagined this ending. It had only been ten days since he met Rin Kusakabe. There were so many things he wanted to talk to her about, ask her about, but he wouldn't get to say any of it, ask anything. And it wasn't just Rin. Ash Roller was the opponent in Haruyuki's first loss as a Burst Linker, and in his first win. Ever since, they had duelled countless times, polishing each other's skills in the process. They were rivals from different Legions, and two players with the same goal, aiming for the limits of speed.

He absolutely could not accept losing both Rin and Ash at the same time. Haruyuki turned his eyes pleadingly toward Sky Raker, sitting in her wheelchair nearby. The Burst Linker, master to both Ash and Crow, silently returned his gaze, her mouth shut. Her twilight-colored eye lenses appeared to be urging him to accept it—or waiting for him to rise up.

Haruyuki felt it was both. Fuko was putting the choice on Haruyuki. Would he simply nod at Ash's words and accept an eternal good-bye? Or would he lift his face even higher in this situation and try to seek out a path to the sky?

He blinked hard, shook off his tears, and stared up into the night sky of the Bizarre Festival stage. Perhaps the aftershocks of the large explosion still lingered; there was a meager break in the thick clouds. On the other side, a single small star glittered alone. It couldn't have been, but whenever he was on the edge of despair and disheartened, he felt like it was always this same star he found in the night sky.

Haruyuki took Ash's hand from his shoulder, brought it in front of his face, and squeezed tightly, as hard as he could. "Ash. There's still...There's still just one way left to fight. Just one way to remove the ISS kit from the bike and cut off the mental interference with Rin right now."

“.....”

Ash Roller waited silently for him to continue.

Mustering all the force he had to stare intently at Ash Roller, Haruyuki stated, “We cut out the root of the chain. We’ll destroy the ISS kit main body in the Tokyo Midtown Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Right now.”

“...Well said, Corvus.”

Immediately after returning to the real world, Fuko murmured the words from directly next to his ear.

Before he could say anything in response, the direct cable was yanked from his neck. Haruyuki, similarly, hurriedly pulled the cable from Rin’s neck where she was lying on the bed with her eyes closed. Right after he tucked it away in his daypack, the white curtain surrounding the bed was yanked open.

“Sorry. Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m just going to have a look at your vital data now, okay?” a woman dressed neatly in a white doctor’s coat said as she ran her fingers through the air.

It was the school nurse, Mitsu Hotta. With an ad hoc connection to Rin’s Neurolinker, she got the monitor data on Rin’s temperature and pulse and things, then furrowed her brow slightly. “You have a bit of a fever, but all your other numbers are normal. Did you maybe overexert yourself at the festival? How about you rest a little and we’ll see how you do?”

Haruyuki let out a slight sigh at this diagnosis. It was already clear that the reason Rin collapsed wasn’t a cold or overeating, so it would have made the situation that much more complicated if she were carried away in an ambulance or something.

Saying she was just going to grab a rehydration pack, Ms. Hotta headed for the refrigerator in a corner of the room, and Fuko took advantage of the moment to murmur to Haruyuki, “I’ll explain to Mayuzumi and everyone else, so you stay with Rin a lit-

tle longer. I'll mail you as soon as we decide on a plan of action."

"Okay...Thank you."

He dipped his head and also gave a nod to a worried Takumu on the other side of the curtain. Fuko squeezed Rin's hand tightly before standing up and urging Takumu to join her in walking toward the entrance. Returning to take their place, Ms. Hotta handed Haruyuki the oral rehydration bottle and smiled just a little for some reason before moving to her desk a ways off.

Haruyuki first helped Rin up into a sitting position before unscrewing the cap of the bottle. The built-in straw automatically popped up, and he brought it to her mouth.

Taking tiny sips of the cool liquid, Rin let out a light sigh and gazed at him. Right now, she still remembered the battle that had unfolded in the Bizarre Festival stage and the words that had been exchanged there. He wouldn't have to explain again what Ash Roller—her brother Rinta Kusakabe—had told them, or what Haruyuki had decided.

So he stared quietly into Rin's grayish eyes and kept himself to a brief statement. "It's okay. This time, it'll be me who helps you out."

Rin hung her head slightly and slowly closed her eyes. Tiny droplets of water collected on her eyelashes, shimmering and shaking there. ... "I'm. Sorry...I..." The reason for the apology was probably the fact that she had been parasitized by the ISS kit, as well as the fact that she had hidden this throughout the school festival.

Haruyuki leaned forward and shook his head quickly back and forth. "You don't need to apologize, Kusakabe. The truth is...it's because I was careless..." But he had already said the rest of this in the stage, so he swallowed hard and continued. "...We're definitely going to go and eliminate the main body. And then we can

go look at the rest of the festival together.”

Rin kept her face down for a little while longer, but she finally lifted it and brought a smile—albeit a pained one—across her lips. Nodding sharply, she spoke in a voice that echoed in Haruyuki’s ears with a purity that was almost heartrending. “...Okay.”

In reply, he nodded firmly before setting the rehydration bottle on the small table there, and then he made her lie down once more. After covering her up to her shoulders with the blanket, he stood up and moved away from the bed.

He closed the white curtain and went over to where Ms. Hotta was tapping away at a keyboard at her desk. “Ms. Hotta, I just have something to take care of and then I’ll be back, so please watch out for Kusakabe.”

“Roger.” Raising her head from her holowindow, the health teacher grinned once more. “...And maybe it would be a good idea if we kept her a secret from the student council vice president?”

“Nngh...” His spine snapping to attention, Haruyuki finally grasped the reason for Ms. Hotta’s meaningful smiles. On Thursday the week before last, when Haruyuki had collapsed after overexerting himself in gym class, he had been brought to the nurse’s office, and Ms. Hotta knew that Kuroyukihime, the student council vice president, had accompanied him—and not only that, she had even signed Kuroyukihime’s trumped-up health aide confirmation.

He restrained himself from stammering “S-s-s-s-secret, please” and replied, “N-no, it’s not a problem.”

“All right, then.” The health teacher smiled once more. “We’ll see you later.”

The instant Haruyuki stepped out into the hallway, the text mail icon flashed in his field of view. Pressing it, he saw that the

sender was not Fuko but Kuroyukihime, and he unconsciously looked around, but of course, she wasn't there. He opened the mail to see just the sentence, WE'RE WAITING IN THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE, but it didn't say how the discussion had gone amongst the Legion members, notably with Niko and Pard added in.

To be honest, Haruyuki didn't think everyone would immediately agree to his resolution to take on the challenge of destroying the ISS kit main body right then and there. After all, there was a fearsome guardian, the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron, protecting the Tokyo Midtown Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field where the main kit body was hidden. He knew an attack strategy was supposed to be seriously debated at an upcoming meeting of the Seven Kings. Going up against the strongest being in the Accelerated World—excluding the Four Gods—with fewer than ten people went beyond difficult and into reckless.

The Haruyuki of before would have no doubt brooded over taking on Metatron all alone if he got opposition. But now, not even a spark of that idea popped into his head. Neither Rin nor Ash would be the slightest bit happy to see Haruyuki end up in Unlimited EK in a suicide attack. This was a battle not for fighting, but for rescue. It was different from the time when he was fused with the Armor and ran off seeking death.

So if they say no, I'll beg them with all the words and feelings I have, until I get them to understand that while it might be a reckless plan, I think it's definitely not impossible.

Resolving this in his mind, Haruyuki trotted down the busy central hallway and went into the first school building.

The door of the student council office on the western edge of the first floor was locked, but when he approached, it automatically unlocked for him. He took a deep breath and then pushed the sliding door open. The instant he stepped inside and pulled it shut behind him—

“Yer late, Crow!” Niko yelled with real force, leaning back on the sofa set with her legs crossed.

The other seven—Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, Akira, Takumu, Chiyuri, and Pard—all lifted their heads to look at Haruyuki at once.

Even though he had only just so firmly readied himself, when he saw his comrades, he couldn’t get the first words out. He stood stock-still next to the door and simply clenched his hands together tightly.

Kuroyukihime, sitting directly across from Niko, stood up and smiled gently but forcefully. “What are you standing there for, Haruyuki? We don’t have much time, do we? Hurry and sit. We’ve finished getting everything ready.”

The moment he heard the swordmaster’s voice, all the words he had arranged in his mind scattered and flew off, so that Haruyuki could only shout, “Okay!!”

Ten minutes in real time. Seven days in the Accelerated World.

That was the activation time Kuroyukihime set for the forced disconnect safety—in other words, the maximum time they could spend on the mission. The reason was, apparently, that they could only monopolize the student council office, which was the sole safe place for all eight of them to dive, from twelve fifteen to twelve thirty. The first five minutes would be given to a briefing in the real world, and the next ten were for the actual mission.

“Sorry, Haruyuki,” Kuroyukihime said. “In the middle of the festival, the only time this room is empty is when the student council is out for lunch.”

Haruyuki hurriedly rose up from the sofa, waving his hands back and forth. “No, seven days should be more than enough. I mean, the target time for the mission to rescue me and Shi-

nomiya from the Castle was just two hours, so.”

“Right, right! And even that time, we were so tired of waiting, we practically turned to butter,” Chiyuri chirped from immediately to Haruyuki’s right. “So with seven days, we’ll end up being cheese!”

“Chii, even if you let butter sit, it doesn’t turn into cheese,” Takumu, farther down the sofa, pointed out, overly serious. “And to begin with, to turn into butter, it’s not when it sits for a long time, it’s when it’s spun at high speeds.”

“I wanna spin that Radio round really good, then! Although, even if he did turn into butter, I’d say a big ‘no thanks’ to eating that,” Niko said, sounding profoundly disgusted, her hands clasped behind her head—and then all of them erupted in cheerful laughter.

Once that had subsided, Fuko, directly across from Haruyuki, composed herself and said, “I also think that is plenty of time, but there is one serious problem in carrying out this mission. Because the main body of the ISS kits is conjectured to be in the Tokyo Midtown Tower of the Unlimited Neutral Field, we will, naturally, have to dive *up*.”

“Oh...!” Haruyuki cried out unconsciously. If he was going to propose an immediate attack on Midtown Tower, then that was the thing he should have thought of first and foremost. Of the eight people there, one Burst Linker could not dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, because of her level and one other specific issue.

Haruyuki turned his eyes momentarily on Akira Himi—Aqua Current, level-one and still in an Unlimited EK state at the Castle—sitting next to Fuko and quickly dropped his gaze down to the table. “I-I’m sorry, Curren...My head was just full of the ISS kit thing...”

“No need to apologize,” Akira said calmly, and she silently looked at each of them in turn as she continued. “Don’t worry about me. Go and take care of what needs to be taken care of now. Although it’s regrettable that I can’t help with this important mission, I can at least pray with all my heart for your victory.”

“...Curren...,” Kuroyukihime murmured, biting her lip.

Breaking the heavy silence was, unexpectedly, Pard, who was seated to Akira’s right. The words she spoke were also a surprise to Haruyuki: “That choice isn’t very like you, Aki.”

“...”

Akira silently turned her gaze to her side, and Pard stared right back at her. There wasn’t any direct point of contact between them, and yet Haruyuki was made once again aware of how they so closely resembled each other somehow.

“Water is water precisely because it continues to flow. Stagnating doesn’t suit you, Aki.”

“...So then are you telling me to do something, Myah?” Akira asked quietly in response.

Pard, still with her usual calm look on her face, proposed something that no one else had even considered. “You can just escape from the Unlimited EK right now and join in the Metatron mission. With seven days, executing both missions is plenty possible. And with this group, we have enough firepower, too.”

“B-but...” Kuroyukihime hesitated. That was only for an instant, however, and then the Black King got a decisive look on her face.

She turned to Niko, sitting directly on the other side of the low table between them. “...That work, Red King? To be honest, Leop-

ard's proposal is the best thing we could ask for. Because our chances of success are far greater that way than if we were to carry out a rescue mission with just the members of Nega Nebulus. But the fact that it is a difficult mission is unchanged. This would mean that senior Promi member Blood Leopard and Promi's leader—you yourself, Scarlet Rain—would be running the risk of dying in Seiryu's fierce attack, and not just once. There's also a good chance of being hit with the special attack Level Drain...or, in the worst-case scenario, ending up in Unlimited EK, just like Curren..."

Even after Kuroyukihime had closed her mouth, Niko said nothing for a while; she sat with her back leaned against the sofa, her legs crossed and body still. But after a few seconds, she nodded, making the hair tied up on either side of her head bob up and down. "Well, this time, at least, I can't be the only one saying no. At any rate, it was exactly for this that Pard has sealed away leveling up until today, after all."

"Huh? Wh-what does that mean...?!" Haruyuki cried out in great surprise. It was true; he'd always found it strange that Pard, supposedly an old hand, was at level six, only one above himself, Takumu, and Chiyuri. When he'd asked Niko about it before, although she'd dodged the question, he remembered her mentioning something about it being connected to her longtime rival, Sky Raker. If the reason was in fact not about Raker, but instead Aqua Current, then that meant Pard and Curren had some kind of close relationship beyond rivalry.

"Oh...No way...But, mmm-mmm, right...So that's it," Chiyuri said, coming to an understanding on her own.

Unable to stand it, Haruyuki asked in a small voice, "H-hey, so what's it?"

"Not telling. I'm sure you'll find out once the mission's over."

Haruyuki had learned from experience that when his clear-

faced childhood friend refused to tell him something, it was pointless to keep pestering her. He was forced to withdraw, and instead, Kuroyukihime spoke again.

“We have one minute, thirty seconds before the start of the dive. We have to decide on an action plan. Rain. And Leopard. We gratefully accept your offer to help with the mission to rescue Aqua Current...Curren, that’s all right, yes?”

Questioned by the Legion Master, Akira was hanging her head as if still struggling. But when she lifted her face a second later, she nodded with a serious look. “Actually, this was a request I should have made. I’ve spent two and a half years circulating in a closed circle...I’m very happy right now that the time has come that I, too, can start to flow forward, aiming for the distance once more. All of you, please, lend me your strength.” Akira bowed her head deeply.

Utai, sitting to the left of Fuko, who had maintained her silence until then, quickly moved her fingers in the air. UI> REN, THIS WILL ABSOLUTELY, DEFINITELY BE OKAY. EVERYTHING WILL GO WELL. BECAUSE WE HAVE WITH US A BIRD WHO BRINGS HAPPINESS!

...Ha-ha, she means Hoo, huh? Haruyuki nodded his agreement.

“So then, before the mission starts, we’ll have to paint Haru’s avatar blue, right!” Chiyuri said forcefully.

“H-huh?! Me?!”

“That would also have the effect of increasing his camouflage while flying, hmm?” At this overly serious comment from Takumu, everyone except Haruyuki laughed together again.

After stopping briefly in the normal duel field to discuss the details of Aqua Current’s rescue, right on schedule at 12:20 PM, they shouted “Unlimited Burst!” in unison.

Back in the Unlimited Neutral Field after an absence of four days, Haruyuki landed in the fondly familiar Century End stage. The grounds of Umesato Junior High were riddled with cracks, and flames flickered and danced up from rusted oil drums. Haruyuki stared in turn at each of the colors in the duel avatar rainbow lined up and against this light.

The Black King, World End, Black Lotus.

Deputy of Nega Nebulus, the wind of the Four Elements, Strong Arm Sky Raker.

The fire of the Four Elements, shrine maiden of the conflagration, Ardor Maiden.

Nega Nebulus member, the Watch Witch, Lime Bell.

Also a Nega Nebulus member, Cyan Pile.

The Red King, the Immobile Fortress, Scarlet Rain.

Prominence deputy, one of the Triplex, nicknamed Bloody Kitty, Blood Leopard.

It was only natural, but the figure of the water of the Four Elements, Aqua Current, was not there. She would be diving a little after the rest of them, three hours of time on this side later. Her nickname of The One would be gone that day, because in order to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field once more, she would be spending her accumulated Burst Points to bring her level up to four.

Feeling like he should again say a word of thanks to his comrades, who had agreed to this mission to save Ash Roller and Rin Kusakabe, Haruyuki stood a little taller and bowed his head deeply to the seven before him. "...Thank you so much. I know we're in the middle of the festival, but you've all joined in without saying a word...Especially Rain and Pard. You don't even have

real stakes with Ash—”

“Hold up there. I wanna double-check something before we get to that,” Niko interjected, the antennae on either side of her head bobbing up and down. “Is that girl with the totally weak aura seriously the real of Ash Roller from GW?”

“Y-yeah. The situation’s a little complicated. I guess you could say she has a different personality in the Accelerated World.”

“There’s peeps who’ll change personalities during the duel, but, like, that is seriously too much of a change!”

She was more than right to think this, but Haruyuki wasn’t sure how much of the situation with Rin and Rinta he should share.

“But,” Pard said, “she totally knew all the old types of motorcycles.”

“Oh yeah, you did that whole naming thing in Crow’s class display. You think you could be buds?”

The question was primarily for the leopard, and she nodded without hesitation. “Y. Already buds.”

“So then we got stakes, too. Which is, like, Crow, once the mission starts, don’t be holding back with me and Pard for whatever!”

“Rain...Pard...” Haruyuki’s heart was full, and it was all he could do to simply say their names.

But Fuko slid forward silently on her wheelchair and stood up to bow deeply. “I would also add my thanks. Thank you, Red King...and you, Leopard.”

It seemed that not only did Niko and Pard already know that Rin was Ash Roller in the real but also even knew that her parent

was Sky Raker.

“NP.” Nodding in return, Pard spoke at unusual length. “The bond of parent and child’s just as important for me as the bond with Master or with my rivals.”

Hearing this, Haruyuki suddenly had a thought. The Master Pard mentioned was, of course, Niko, and the rival meant Raker, against whom she had sharpened her sword in duels in the past. So then, who exactly was the parent?

Raker bowed her head once more to the two members of the Red Legion and then turned her whole body toward Haruyuki. “Corvus. I have to say my thanks to you as well. Thank you for deciding to fight for those two.”

“N-no! Rin and Ash are my friends. They’re important to me.” After shaking his head any number of times, Haruyuki took a deep breath and added, “Please save those words for the time when we defeat Metatron, invade Midtown Tower, and are done smashing the ISS kit main body!”

“Mmm, well said, Crow!” This clear voice was, of course, Kuroyukihime’s. She also advanced to stand beside Haruyuki and brought the sword of her right hand sharply through the air. “I will not deny that due to the suddenness of this mission, we are lacking in both advance preparation and attack personnel. However, that is precisely why we can see our chance for victory. Because, given how the suspicion that Quad Eyes is a member of the Acceleration Research Society does nothing but deepen, we can assume that she would leak to them any information from upcoming meetings of the Seven Kings. Even the Acceleration Research Society can’t anticipate us daring to attack Midtown Tower at this time. In other words...”

She stopped here and turned the tip of her sword toward the southeast.

“...our adversary is only one: Metatron. If we can eliminate that Legend-class Enemy, our swords will reach the ISS kit main body!”

Fyoo! Bringing her sword down to slice through the air, Kuroyukihime turned her body slightly and, this time, pointed due east with the sword of her left hand.

“In executing this mission, the abilities and intelligence of the Four Elements’ Aqua Current will be a huge asset. Thus, we first bring Curren back from the nest of the God Seiryu. Although this is an enemy more powerful than Metatron, there is no need to defeat it. If we all combine our power, I believe it will be possible to rescue her without collateral damage. We will be taking on the challenge of successive large-scale missions, but in order to smash the Society’s scheme and cut out the root of rot in the Accelerated World, I’m counting on all of you to fight hard!!”

Haruyuki and the other members of Nega Nebulus all thrust their right hands up into the air at these bold words, while the two members of Prominence followed suit a second or two later and shouted, “Yeah!”

Lowering his hand, Haruyuki returned to the line, burning with fighting spirit. There, Niko sidled up to him, standing tall as she whispered, “So, look, is it always like this with you guys before a mission?”

“Huh? ...Y-yeah, it’s basically like this.”

“I-it is? Nah, it’s nothing...”

He looked at Niko as she crossed her arms, and he cocked his head to one side before a sudden thought struck him. “That reminds me. Don’t the trains run in the Century End stage?”

“N. Most of the tracks are destroyed,” Pard responded from behind Niko. She asked why with her eyes, so he explained,

scratching at one side of his helmet.

“Oh, it’s just kinda far to Marunouchi, where the east gate of the Castle is, so I was just wondering how we’d move. It’ll take a while if we walk, so...”

The instant she heard this, Niko’s eye lenses flashed. Just as a bad feeling came over him, the small, crimson-red avatar hugged him. “Big brother! This time for sure, you gotta fly with just me in your arms! I mean, I’m the special guest and all!”

“N-no, that’s, um...”

“Whoa, hey, Red! You just said we shouldn’t give you special treatment!”

When Kuroyukihime’s scary voice suddenly echoed from directly behind him, Haruyuki could do nothing but freeze.

“And exactly what are you going to do, flying ahead with Crow when there are so few of us to begin with?!”

“That’s that, then. We’ll just have to get big brother to carry all of us this time!”

“Wh-whaaaaat?! N-no, no, I can’t. Seven people is too much!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I was kidding! A joke!” Niko turned off angel mode and released Haruyuki before jumping down behind him. She whirled her head around and said in a completely different tone, “I’ll be your taxi to Marunouchi. Huge freebie for you. Step back a little, yeah?”

“Huh? O-kay...”

She had said “taxi,” but Niko’s main body was the smallest of any of them; she looked like she might have been just barely able to carry Maiden. However, with all of her Enhanced Armament deployed, just as her nickname Immobile Fortress would have it,

she was tens of times bigger, but her mobility was lacking.

Haruyuki and the other six members of the Black Legion all cocked their collective heads to the side, but Pard casually got some distance, so they followed her example. Left alone in the middle of the grounds, Niko thrust her right hand up and shouted, “Equip Invincible!!”

Instantly, her small body was wrapped in a pillar of red light. A throaty roar shook the air, and a massive object materialized in the space around her. Niko’s body floated up into space in the middle of missile pods, gun blocks, armaments for both sides, armor plating with thrusters for her rear, and four massive limbs, and then, with an even more remarkable roar, the equipment fused together.

He had seen this any number of times, but Haruyuki was always overwhelmed by this might, so befitting the name Red King. Still, her figure, essentially transformed into a fixed fort, was a far cry from a taxi, no matter how he looked at it.

But.

Niko, enveloped in the center of the armament squad, her eye lenses alone shining, shouted another voice command in a high-pitched voice. “Change: Dreadnought!!”

Once more, a low roar shook the earth. The leg-part blocks sticking out on all four sides rotated and fused, two in the front, two in the back. The angled gun block in the front slid forward, and the missile pods were tucked away behind it. In the very rear, the thruster-equipped armor was stored. The main armaments to the right and left were attached to both sides, and finally, a total of twelve thick tires appeared beneath the leg blocks. What existed before Haruyuki’s eyes was no longer a fixed gun battery, but a massive armed trailer that easily surpassed a total of ten meters in length.

Gaping, dumbfounded, Haruyuki thought abruptly, *Oh, is that it?*

This was the new power Niko had mentioned the previous evening: Acquiring the ability to move while still maintaining a certain level of firepower—not an immovable stronghold, but a Mobile Fortress.

Pard turned toward the frozen Black Legion members, raised her thumb, and jerked her hand up. Then she leapt upward without a sound onto the top of the trailer, nearly three meters above the ground.

Haruyuki and his friends looked at each other and nodded before jumping up, one after the other. Finally, Haruyuki used his wings to carry the wheelchair with Fuko sitting in it and landed on the flat armored surface. The top was much wider than it had looked from below, with plenty of space left even after all seven of them were on board.

“I do still think this isn’t a taxi,” Utai murmured, and everyone bobbed their head in agreement.

Not seeming to pay any mind to this remark, Niko, tucked away in the front of the trailer, shouted forcefully, “So we don’t run into any huge Enemies or other Burst Linkers, once we get past Kannana, we’ll blast down back roads! So hang on tight!”

“Uh, um, Niko, seats or seat belts or at least a strap to hang on to...”

“Don’t be such a wimp. I’m not a taxi! Wohkay! Off to the Castle. Here! We! Gooooooo!”

The engine—*Which is where?* Haruyuki wondered—roared, and the massive trailer jumped forward, smoke peeling up from all twelve tires. In the blink of an eye, they were cutting diagonally across the Umesato Junior High grounds, and they pulver-

ized what had once been the school festival gate as they pulled out onto the road.

Once they had gone just a little bit north, they turned right, drifting on twelve fearsome wheels. They had no sooner flown onto Oume Highway than they began to charge east with enough force to crush the asphalt road surface.

Leaning forward against the acceleration, Haruyuki lifted his face and stared into the night sky dead ahead. From far-off Suginami, he couldn't actually see it, but below this sky was the Castle, guarded by a Super-level Enemy, and Tokyo Midtown Tower, holding the main body of the ISS kits.

Curren. Today, I'm going to pay you back for helping me that time. And Ash, Kusakabe...Hang on just a little longer. We're going to end this. We'll make Rin's suffering go away.

“...For sure!” Haruyuki affirmed to himself, clenching his fist tightly.

On his forearm, he spied the light-conducting crystal that was proof he'd obtained the Optical Conduction ability. For just a moment, it collected the light of the hazy night and shone brightly.

To be continued.



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Accel World 13: Signal Fire at the Water's Edge*.

I gave this book that subtitle with the meaning of a signal fire going up on the very edge of the border. In other words, the sign of the counteroffensive has been shot up and will pull on into the next volume. Since the Armor of Catastrophe arc took several books, from six to nine, I think the Metatron arc will take at least three, but it might just end up being the same four volumes long. I'm not planning to go all the way to five volumes...No, I definitely won't! I swear it on the ISS kit shining in my chest!

All of which means that this volume is one in which problems aren't really resolved (and in fact, they increase in number), but Aqua Current, one of the Four Elements—and who first appeared in the story “The Sound of Water on a Distant Day,” collected in Volume 10—was able to come back to the Legion, so I'm relieved at the long-awaited increase in battle power. And, well, I won't deny that it's unfortunate that one element of the character, the fact that she is level one, will be so quickly reversed, although this is an inevitable development given the course of the story (lol). But I would like to be able to tell the story of why she continued to work as a bodyguard and stay at level one for such a long time and her motivations for that in the next volume.

And one other thing in this volume I finally got to write about was the Umesato Junior High school festival, which had been foretold by just its date a fair while back. For the festival, I tried to write in a style of depicting the details of an event one after another, something I don't really do, but I was a little unsure about

it, so I put the question, “How does this style of writing work...?” to my editor, and she replied, “Actually, this is the usual in a light novel,” and I thought, “Oh, I get it!” Since basically all the AW heroines are together (for some reason, Kuroyukihime alone isn’t there...), I do hope you had fun with it.

In the Territories in the middle again, as the rival team members, I had the pleasure of introducing avatars that I received during the campaign for duel avatar proposals. Thank you so much to Uda, who designed Blaze Heart, Yuno for Ochre Prison, and Uraomote Yamaneko for Peach Parasol! In putting them into the story, I took the liberty of doing some fine-tuning of the avatar names and abilities. I appreciate your understanding.

When Volume 13 is published, more than a month of 2013 will have passed, and I suppose it will be the time when all kinds of things start to settle down. I’m writing this afterword in December 2012, so I’m looking back on a tumultuous year as I tap at the keyboard.

The *Accel World* anime started airing in April and finished in September, but with all the preparation, meetings, and writing of small additional pieces, I was involved with the anime version for nearly two years. The hard parts were hard, but I gained so much from the experience. I’d like to make use of all of that to continue to write with the aim of even more interesting stories. I do hope you will continue to have the same unwavering support for Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime and all their friends in 2013 as well!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in December 2012